



Tagore and the academic study of religion

Abrahim H. KHAN*

ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), at about the start of the nineteenth century, was advocating that the study about religion has to be included in university-level education in the East. The university he envisioned and founded (Visva-Bharati) included in its curriculum such a study. Shortly after India's regaining independence in 1947 and becoming a secular state, that institution was inaugurated as a central university with an advanced institute for philosophy and the study of religion. This essay answers whether his understanding of studying religion would accommodate the approach to the academic study of religion associated with the modern Western research university. It also inquires the extent that the curriculum for the study of religion at Visva-Bharati evidences such an approach. The answers it advances draw primarily on his two essays, *Eastern University* and *Hindu University*, which offer his vision of university level education; on commissioned reports for higher level education in the new India as a secular state; on developments in the academic study of religion in the West, especially the United States; on the relatively recent revised curriculum for such a study at Visva-Bharati University; and on ideas of social imaginary and the comparative study of religion articulated by Western scholars.

KEYWORDS

Rabindranath Tagore; Visva-Bharati; comparative study of religions; social imaginary; human person; truth; *dharmic* traditions; rational inquiry; modern research university

* Professor, Faculty of Divinity, Trinity College and cross-appointed to the Graduate Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada. E-mail: khanah@chasss.utoronto.ca.

Philosophical writer and intellectual advocate for East-West civilizational bridging, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) directed attention to a unity of truth, knowledge and life. He was part of the nineteenth century intellectual-cultural revitalising and social reformation phase¹ India was undergoing in response to an influx of western ideas creating difficulties for a cultural meeting of East and West. The phase has for its analogue in European history the Enlightenment, though cultural conditions and historical circumstance are somewhat different. Tagore wrote in the service of constructive alternatives of thought, actions, and institutions. Though a thinker with visionary strength, he was also a man of action, renowned as educator and reformer. For he took his Nobel Prize money to start in 1921 Visva Bharati College, that in 1951 became a central or federal university in independent India that understood itself as constitutionally secular. By the mid 60's it was the first central university to have a department of philosophy and comparative religion offering advanced research studies in the areas. The word 'comparative' in the name of the department *prima facie* meant that the curriculum was committed to the study of more than one religious tradition.

Tagore advanced his forward thinking about university level education and the study of different religions in the context of the awakening of Asia *vis-à-vis* Europe. The university setting was a site or location for overcoming what for him was the problem of the present age: the estrangement of eastern and western cultures. Two essays encompassing his vision of a university as a centre of learning in the East, compared to university and education in the West: *An Eastern University*, first published in 1916,² and *Hindu University* (1911).³ Each presses the point that the university is the locus to reshape ancient Indian ideals so as to respond to the exigencies of the times, to usher India into the modern age and thereby revealing her to the West. In the twenty first century his conceptualizing of the study of religion in a university setting may shed light on concern about the appropriateness of applying western methodological categories to the Indian context in studying what is deemed religion.⁴ Though a relevant concern, its bearing is tangential to the primary focus of this presentation that is guided by a specific question about Tagore as educator and reformer.

¹ The phase, tagged sometimes as the Bengal renaissance movement in early nineteenth century India, is marked by a group of intellectuals in the state of Bengal tackling the proliferation of western ideas under British rule and the impact it was making on the mind-set of Indians with a culture, history, philosophical outlook, and reform strategies of their own for modernizing India. Rationalism tempering free thinking, critical inquiry, atheism, and scientific advancements are some of the hallmarks of that phase.

² Later included in the collection of papers: *Creative unity*, and further referred to as Tagore, 1971.

³ Reprinted in the collection of papers: *Towards a universal Man*; further referred to as Tagore, 1961b.

⁴ A recent publication raising a concern is Sonia Sikka (Sikka, 2015: 107–125).

The main question for this essay is whether the study of religion Tagore advocates as an educator and reformer sheds light on an approach to the academic study of the phenomenon of religion. Employing essays that conceptualize his vision of a university, this study answers by focussing on two subsidiary and related questions: Would Tagore's understanding of studying about religion accommodate the approach to the academic study of religion associated with the modern western research university? And second, does the current curriculum of the university he founded evidence such an approach? The general answer for each question is in the affirmative, but not without clarification that delineates complexities and nuances in nomenclature, social imaginary, and structural and/or institutional developments in curriculum.

A notation about institutional developments in education is a starting point for clarifying complexities and nuances. That is, the introduction of the comparative study of religion in the curriculum of Visva-Bharati University followed later developments connected with thinking about the duties and responsibilities of the university in new India described by commissioned reports. Three in particular are significant, and of one accord (Khan, 2005: 889–892). The report of the University Education Commission (1948–1949) chaired by S. Radhakrishnan had among its tasks to make recommendations on religious instruction in universities and on advanced studies in the humanities as a discipline (Report, 1962). The Report includes the study of religion in the field of humanities as part of educating the whole being of the individual.⁵ It declares that it understands the human mind as a unity of cognition, feeling, and will, and that knowledge is interdependent on them (Report, 1962: 36). It holds further that, 'Religion is not so much a revelation to be attained by faith as an effort to unveil the deepest layers of man's being and get into enduring contact with them' (Report, 1962: 51). Still, further it lays out a curriculum for teaching religious values as part of the general education in three year colleges:

[...] during the first year such a course might well treat of the lives of great religious leaders of all faiths; the second year may be used for presenting the most universal elements of the great religious scriptures; and the third year class may be engaged in a study of the problems of philosophy of religion (Report, 1962: 113).

The recommendations imply that India as a secular state does not mean one has to be a religious illiterate, or that there is no place in the formal education curriculum for religion. Interestingly, for the pre-university level, the Secondary Education Report (1948–1949) agrees that secularism did not mean denial of a place for religion. A second study, the Sri Prakash Committee

⁵ See Report, 1962: 36, Vol. 1, article no. 14, reads 'the human mind is a unity and knowledge is interdependent'. However, article no. 1, refers to the mind as tripartite: cognition, feeling, and will (Report, 1962: 31).

Report (1959–1960), recommends the comparative and systematic study of religions of India. And a still later report, the Kothari Commission (1964–1966), drawing a distinction between religious education and education about religion, suggests establishing chairs in comparative religion at universities.

The reports are significant for what they also imply about the secular-sacred relation in India's modern social imaginary in a transitional period, a relation at the heart of western conceptualization about the study of religion in academia. The expression 'social imaginary' references a set of historical constructs defining the interaction of subjects in society and associated with their cultural images, stories or legends. It is complex, incorporating deep seated modes of understanding collective social life as a whole. As Charles Taylor explains, it is that which extends beyond the immediate background understanding which makes sense of our particular practices, and gives legitimacy to the practices.⁶ They are comprised of epistemes or scrimmage lines that have their own limits and functions and may determine research and outcomes much more than readily realized (Jeppe, 2003: 60).⁷ That is, they are based on assumptions so basic to an era that they may remain invisible to those operating with it. Social imaginary so understood, my contention is that the sacred-secular relation is not a divisive one in the social imaginary of India, as in that of the West. The relation poses no great challenge for India to the institutionalizing of the study of religion in state funded institutions. For it accords well with *dharmā*, a single word that is integral to the Indian social imaginary. *Dharma* expresses a cosmic principle or law. It has also a relational value, for it is the law by which one lives in accordance, by which we become consciousness of social practice, ideals, place, time, personal characteristics and role. Context-sensitive, its meaning encompasses the different pathways in Indian civilization to realizing a spiritual presence apparent in our ordinary consciousness and that makes us dissatisfied with mere worldly pursuits and advantages (Report, 1962: 52, art. 55). What is more telling from the report is the fact that it recognizes India as having a plurality of *dharmic* paths. Though the paths are important for cultural reasons and for moral and spiritual developments as part of educating the whole person, nevertheless secular India remains impartial to religions in conducting affairs of the state.

In the West, by comparison, the sacred-secular relation is somewhat problematic. Modern western social imaginary carries the scars of long lasting religious wars: from the Crusades to the 30 Year War traumatising Europe. Certain facts (Dewald, 2004; Cavendish, 1998) about the end of the 30 Year War suggest the extent of the trauma. Representatives from 196 different European

⁶ On social imaginary see Taylor, 2000; Taylor, 2007: 171f.

⁷ Jeppe points out about epistemes that they have the same modalities of world constructions in syllabuses as in works of fiction or narratology: what would count as true or false, how we come to know, what is doubttable or knowable, and what is good or bad, exciting or trivial.

states affected one way or another, in December 1643, attended peace talks in Münster and Osnabrück. Six months were spent squabbling about who was to sit where and who would take precedence in entering the room. Then after four years they would reach a working settlement for religious and political co-existence, and hence an end to the horrors of war: pillage, plundering, burning, famine and even cannibalism, armies sweeping their way through towns, mercenaries stalking the country side, and the killing of dogs and cats in almost every town and village. In short, the Treaty of Westphalia (1684) did more than restore civil order. It relegated the authority and empire building impulses of the Catholic Church to the private sphere by demarcating the public sphere as that dealing with largely civil matters, social order, trade, economics, science, and international agreements and relations. The study of religion in publicly funded universities is a reminder of what is likely to recur as religion gains a foothold in shaping public life.

Alternatively expressed in terms of the King's two bodies described by Ernest Kantorowicz (Kantorowicz, 1957), the Church as religion has two bodies that form one indivisible unit. One body is full present in the other. That is, a physical body or presence relating to the private or spiritual life is incorporated in the body politics. The latter is much larger, indivisible and invisible, for it consist of policies, directions in managing and governing people for social order, and is in congruity with the physical body. The two bodies are not prescriptive but assist in seeing better the reality of how things are. The body politic raises the spectre of the painful experiences brought on by religious wars, and the eclipse of individual freedom to determine the shape of one's own life. For the descendants of settled European immigrants in America the gaining of a foothold by religion, whether in its Catholic or Protestant version, in the public sphere is a threat to annulling the sacred-secular divide and hence what would count as knowledge and truth that is important for social order as well. Of course, it finds sympathisers and protagonists of those coming out of a background (communist era) in which a notion of the sacred has been erased. The canons of reason and ratiocination would likely take second place to the authority or body politic of religion. Maintaining the rift in the sacred-secular relation determines how the study of religion in publicly funded research universities is to be demarcated, and how structurally different the curriculum would be compared to that in the East.

The demarcation of the study of religion is not without controversy. For the sacred-secular dichotomy is really a short hand referencing of the Church and State separation. The latter is a calcified institutional arrangement or separation that is absent from the Indian civilization social imaginary. But in the West the separation has resulted in contestation as to how the study of religion should proceed. European scholars tend to favour an approach that is considered historical, hence the history of religions, or sometimes termed

Religionswissenschaft. But for some U.S. scholars, especially in state-funded research institutions, the academic study of religion follows a social science methodology, meaning that it is descriptive and reductive in its explanation of the phenomenon of religion. It adheres to the same academic rigour or standards as other disciplines in a modern research university: critical analytical inquiry, testability, theoretical refinements and whatever else is deemed constitutive of procedural rationality. More pointedly put, this scientific approach to the study of religion aims to attain in the words of a leading advocate “‘public knowledge’ of public facts, mediated through intersubjectively testable sets of statements, whether at the descriptive level of history, ethnography, and phenomenology, or at the explanatory level of law-like generalizations and theory’ (Wiebe, 2006: 691). One of the antecedents of this objective science approach at the curricular level in U.S. universities is area studies that would later provide training programs for the U.S. military in languages, culture, history and economics of different parts of the world.⁸ This meant having to study or describe people’s religion as part of the culture, without assessing beliefs for truth or falsity.

Standing counter to the scientific-historical is another approach driven by one or a mixture of the following: therapeutic assumptions, identity politics, promoting the integrity of the life of the mind, postmodern science concerns, non-cognitivist influences, or appeal to either confessional or dogmatic considerations. It has for a curricular backdrop in academia the belief among the savants in the West, especially in the United States, that religion introduced in the higher education curriculum of American institutions would recover what the modern research university with its emphasis on scientific and technological developments failed to do. That is, to understand and preserve western culture and its connection to European Christianity, especially to the rise of capitalism, in light of U.S. involvement in international politics, in the World War II and Cold War period. Delineating the U.S. history of religious studies, Hart notes that for some educators religion was as an ‘important ingredient in the West’s stand for liberal democracy against the tyranny of fascism on the right and the rise of communism on the left’ (Hart, 1999: 243f).⁹ Furthermore, as one of America’s basic symbols, religion had been ignored for long in the curriculum of the U.S. higher education. It persists in this, supported by vocal advocates include former U.S. Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, and as shown by the White Paper Study of the American Academy of Religion.¹⁰ To some extent, this approach or intellectual engagement with the phenomenon of religion proliferates globally by scholars trained for doctoral work at

⁸ See for example: *History*, 2015. See also Ludden, 2000.

⁹ For U.S. diplomacy and religion with respect to India, and Asia for that matter, see Khan, 2012: 190–194.

¹⁰ See White Paper, 2008 that cites also Albright, 2006.

distinguished U.S. institutions that are privately funded and offer reasonable financial support in the form of grants, scholarships, and fellowships.¹¹ Clearly, each of the two approaches has its own scrimmage line, both lines comprising the modern social imagery of the West.

Thus far, two points have been advanced as relevant to answering our questions affirmatively. One is that the academic study of religion is a problematic concept, especially as it emerged in the U.S. during the World War II and Cold War years that has for its backdrop memory of the Great Depression followed by booms in defence spending. Driven by mixed motives, the study of religion is associated with at least two distinct approaches or intellectual engagements.¹² One approach honours the sacred or religion as important for the security of the nation state, hence has a utilitarian function. The other honours the secular in its quest for dispassionate knowledge, external data, or public facts. The two suggest clearly a tension in academic circles as to which approach to adopt and why. More than that, it suggests that the study itself in the Cold War period faced an identity crisis, as to whether it a discipline, field, or a mode of religious formation in continuity with the idea of America as a Christian nation. That crisis lingers, as evidenced by presidential addresses, presentation titles, and program unit names of the American Academy of Religion¹³ that now takes an umbrella position to accommodate different perspectives or approaches.

The second point relates to the study of religion in India. In the post-World War II period, India transitioned to a secular modern state on gaining independence. Its social imaginary included a western mode of education, but no construct that would demarcate a separation of religion and state. Nor is there a felt tension in the new India as to which approach to adopt. The Radhakrishnan report on University Education (1948–1949), declares that the study of religion is integral to the academic curriculum, for it is the education¹⁴

¹¹ Harvard University Divinity School, for example, lists 23 doctoral research funding opportunities. See <http://hds.harvard.edu/admissions-aid/financial-aid/outside-funding-opportunities/doctoral-research> (23.03.2015). Northwestern University, according to its Religious Studies website, provides doctoral funding for five years to cover tuition and stipend, plus four summer stipends. This university has a Methodist founding background.

¹² It is possible to discern three approaches by distinguishing in the alternative two subsidiary ones: theological, and 'postmodern science' or no-cognitivist. This latter is indicative of value commitments that are moral-religious.

¹³ See Wiebe, 2006: 676ff., which is an analysis of presidential addresses. The American Academy of Religion annual program books list the program units.

¹⁴ The Report considers education as the development of body, mind, and spirit of each individual (Report, 1962: 32). The three are correlative with three types of existence, the natural, social, and individual that are interdependent (Report, 1962: 31). It defines spirit in the context of the humanities as that of the inner aspirations and ideals, our 'relation to values or the world of spirit' (Report, 1962: 35).

of the whole being of the individual, the understanding of the human as a person. The motive for the study is unmistakably singular and hardly utilitarian, for religion is understood as self-realization, a changed life judged by one's character and disposition (Report, 1962: 257). At the research or doctoral level, the Report casts the approach to the study in terms of the duties that universities have — to discriminate between what gives strength from what degrades, to apply rational methods, and to emphasize the summits of knowledge where all truth converges. To quote this Report:

Religious problems are a challenge to our universities. It is their duty to discriminate between the elements that give strength, dignity and meaning to human life and those that are degrading to our dignity, to apply rational methods of criticism to narrow and intolerant sectarianism and thus turn religious fanatics into scholars. By emphasizing the high summits of knowledge where the truths of all religions converge, they can dispel the shadows of the errors and follies of the past, and infuse into the minds and tempers of future generations Mahatma Gandhi's ideals of truth, tolerance and non-violence (Report, 1962: 135).

The approach, in short, might be characterized as objective in the manner of historical studies and critical analysis but going beyond that to uncover and make acquaintance with the deepest level of the human, or the personal dimension of religion. Claims about that which exceeds the empirical and material are about the noetic level. They are warrantable but in a different way from claims about material objects, perhaps similar to warranting claims in science on what thought or the mind is, or a tripartite division of the Freudian self. That is, there is more to the study of religion than to ascertain facts. For the study, from an Indian perspective implicates humans with their concerns in their subjectivity mode, thus going beyond the observable manifestations of human concerns to the concerns themselves. In short, all human knowledge is a form of self-knowledge.

That said, the alternative aims and curricular studies of the university Tagore envisioned seem to cohere with the commissioned Reports recommending the study of religion. The existing system of education superimposed by the West was in Tagore's words 'a prison house', condemning people 'to carry to the end a dead-load of wisdom', depriving them of 'a place in the festival of colours' (Tagore, 1971: 198). His 1916 essay *An Eastern University* refers to the existing educational institutions as 'India's alms bowl of knowledge, as lowering intellectual self-respect', and encouraging Indians 'to make a foolish display of decorations composed of borrowed feathers' (Tagore, 1971: 179). Another passage gives Tagore's estimate in these words: 'Universities should never be made into mechanical organizations for collecting and distributing knowledge' (Tagore, 1971: 179). They hold out no prospect of making the culture heritage of the East become revealed to the world, or of addressing mankind's growing problem

of a lack of unity (Tagore, 1971: 171, 172, 198). As alternative, he proposed an education intending not 'to collect facts but to know man and to make oneself known to man', and held that the university is one of the places where students and scholars from East and West would 'work together in common pursuit of truth, share together our common heritage' (Tagore, 1971: 172f.).

How then does the study of religion enter into what Tagore is saying about university level education? The university as a center of Indian culture would have a curriculum that would provide for coordinating the study of all the different Asian religious or cultural traditions, and side by side with them is to be placed western culture. Music, architecture, pictorial art, literature, lives and writings of medieval saints, the great religious movements and the debt of foreign influences or currents that have become intermingled with present life are the subject matter for the study (Tagore, 1971: 194f.). In his view this was creating opportunities towards revealing the different peoples to one another and the first step towards realization of the unity of mankind that he was urging. Nothing in the proposal seems to be exempted from the methodological normativity and academic rigour associated with establishing knowledge, any more so than the study of philosophy or literature is exempted. Further, there is no separation of religion from culture, nor any evidence of constructing a sacred-secular distinction in the proposed intellectual activity. Rather, the emphasis in the proposal is on education that recognizes a fullness of expression that is the fullness of life or personality and that will foreseeably produce a fundamental unity among people and civilizations (Tagore, 1971: 171, 196). For Tagore, that expression is not through 'mere language of words', but through the languages of the world of Art: lines, colour sounds, and movements (Tagore, 1971: 196f.). Through mastery of those languages the whole nature or personality is becoming articulated and the human person is understood in all his/her attempts to reveal the innermost being or self (Tagore, 1971: 196f.). *Mukti*, the ideal in the Indian social imaginary for that realization, is what Tagore takes as guiding the centre of Indian culture he is proposing (Tagore, 1971: 201).

The study of religion in Tagore's international university in the East cannot be said to be eschewing the canons of rationality by which knowledge is created. For he recognized modern science to be Europe's great gift to humanity and has to be accepted gratefully by the East. That recognition did not obviate his objection to 'the artificial arrangement by which foreign education tends to occupy all the space of the national mind, and to debilitate creativity of a new-thought power through new combinations of truth' (Tagore, 1971: 193). What he wanted to secure for the East is a center of intellectual life that offers the very kind of vitality and intellectual mind that European universities were offering their own students (Tagore, 1971: 188, 193). This would mean studying about religion, rather than studying religion so as to turn out adherents of a specific faith tradition.

Tagore's earlier essay from 1911 on the Hindu University, introduces that point through tropes already mentioned: deficiency of the existing education policies, the lowering of self-esteem and contempt of all forms of oriental learning at the university level, and the problem of unity through an education that does not wipe out differences. But it is particular also about the importance of applying the scientific method and critical inquiry to the study of India's ancient religious-cultural learning in adapting to the needs of changing times. He wanted to transcend the religious narrowness that for him was a stumbling block to educating all the human faculties for an integrated personality. He puts it this way:

We have not so far applied to our ancient learning those scientific, historical, and rationalist methods that we apply to western learning [...]. In writing the history of India we have not kept away from miracles and supernatural events [...]. In the entire universe India alone is exempt from the law of cause and effect [...]. It is the scriptures that determine whether the sea voyages are good [...], and the pundits must decide whether the entry of a person in to your room would contaminate the water (Tagore, 1961b: 150f).

A sense of the university's curriculum on studying about religion is professed to allay misgiving about the notion of Hinduhood connected with establishing Hindu universities. He reminded that a university breaks through the narrowness of stereotyped thinking, that it sets intelligence to work and seeks to make the mind aware of itself by allowing for free play, and that the human mind is able to correct the error with which one might start. As such, he continued, the university has no place for the Hindu who thinks that 'his special virtue is in a perfect immobility, girded round with scriptural injunctions', and that such a person is well advised to avoid at all means a university; furthermore, to 'consign unreasoning to the university is to entrust it to the wrong hands' (Tagore, 1961b: 153). Altogether, Tagore was calling for an analysis of ancient Indian history, culture, and its social practices based on authority of the scientific method and that of historical and critical analyses. This approach by way of critical analysis was for him a first step in studying the mind of Man in its realization of truth.

Given the aims he delineated for a university — in brief, the place for developing the intellect, for the application of rational and critical inquiry, and for the developing of an integrated personality — the approach to the study of religion is similar in many respects to that of the modern research university. Tagore's conception of a university clearly goes beyond the creation and dissemination of knowledge, beyond establishing facts, or training for livelihood. Other faculties, associated with humanistic studies, are to be developed; for him a university has room for free play intending to produce an integrated personality, one with a sense of infinite depth in feelings and action, and is

thus factually meaningful. The production of such a personality is not a curricular matter, any more than one becomes a musician by learning about the instrument, musical notes, scores, and composing. A well-educated individual in his estimate would want to bring about a unity of knowledge and life — self-improvement with respect to becoming an integrated personality. Does his view of teaching about religion, then, accommodate the academic study of religion in a modern research university? The answer is clearly in the affirmative, but with the provision that the accommodation is a first step in a more integrative process in which personality acquires its depth and wholeness.

To turn to the second question, that of whether the curriculum of the university Tagore founded, Visva-Bharati, evidences the academic study of religion. In 2008 its curriculum for the undergraduate and master's degrees in religion was revised, and a copy of the revised curriculum is the basis for my estimate here.¹⁵ It follows largely the recommendations of the Radhakrishnan Report discussed above. Of the seven papers for the undergraduate program all but two deal specifically with introducing different religious traditions, people and scriptures. One of the remaining two is philosophy of religion, the other is on comparative study as suggested by its title: *Significant religious themes: Comparative study*. However, that title gives no clear indication of treating relatively recent foci such as method and theory, science and religion, cognitive science and religion, or religion and international relations. These seem to be left to the MA curriculum that requires doing five papers, plus a special paper based on two of seven topical areas. There is no clear evidence of seminars or readings either on methodological and theoretical issues, or on the role and significance of religion in its interaction with societies past and present, to judge from the revision. There is, however, a sense of preponderance in weight given to the idea of the development of personhood or integrated personality, teachings, iconic figures or persons, and myths associated with various religious traditions. Nor is there evidence of considering as well African or meso-American traditions, for example. To judge from the readings for each paper, the curriculum to a large extent covers topics that are likely to be found in the offerings of many Canadian or American university departments of religion.

But a question still lingers as to whether the revised curriculum reflects the academic study of religion in the sense of a scientific explanatory methodology. Two reasons already introduced would together warrant giving an answer in the affirmative, though not unqualified. One is that the curriculum privileges no one religion, Visva-Bharati being a Central university of India, a secular state. The other is that it reflects Tagore's ideals of education and religion: the

¹⁵ I am thankful to Asha Mukherjee for copies of the proposal she initiated as Departmental Chair, 2005–2008. Her essay *Religion as a separate area of study in India* (Mukherjee, 2015: 83–103) offers another perspective on the Visva-Bharati University curriculum.

development of scientific attitude and critical inquiry for knowledge in the service of improving humanity's condition at the corporate as well as personal level. This means understanding the human person, as having both an inward as well as outward existence, as seeking that which Tagore expressed lyrically 'where knowledge is free [...] where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way [...] where the mind is led forward [...] into ever-widening thought and action' (Tagore, 1973: v. 35).¹⁶ That is, *dharmic* cultural traditions at least are not understood within a social imaginary making a sacred-secular separation of reality. Coherence and context-sensitivity are more the bias or concerns of such cultural traditions (Ramanujan, 1990: 57), and those very concerns are reflected in its comparative approach to the study of religions shown in the curriculum.

To qualify the answer, what is meant by a comparative religion approach for the curriculum, whether it has a critical intellectual culture of discourse and practice, is not without interrogation. Apparently more associated with the East, the approach has yet to engender a focused and robust discussion with respect to theoretical and methodological issues, to having a principle of internal criticism that accommodates endless revision. For it is now more than half a century since Wilfred Cantwell Smith (Smith, 1959: 31–58), whose view has resonances of Tagore on religion and person or self-knowledge, laid out systematically some principles to demarcate the approach. That approach holds out the possibility to be India's contribution to the academic study of religion, if not already perceived to be that in some quarters. At bottom, it implies methodologically presupposing that the human person has the capacity for a dimension of depth that is factually meaningful and confirmable through disposition and action in the world, yet without being theological. In this respect, it has some affinity to contemporary thinking in the West: Richard Rorty's challenge of mental concepts, objectivity and religious authoritarianism, and Mark C. Taylor's undercutting whatever is based on a classical vision of God, or its binary — the human self as a transferred vision, and turning to art and architecture as paralleling religion (Rorty, 1979; Taylor, 1984: 140, 166, 167; Taylor, 1982). Such contemporary thinking characterizes the modern western academic study of religion, especially its critical aspect known as philosophy of religion, and may be a point of engagement for cross-cultural dialogue on the scope of the study of religion.

To conclude, the benchmark in this presentation is the academic study of religion approach that relies solely on causal explanations, descriptions, and warrantable claims about the natural or testable world. That approach presupposes rational inquiry as leading to truth or knowledge that has objective certainty, obscuring or abjuring a notion of truth as doing or becoming with

¹⁶ It was the verse he read before the Indian National Congress in Calcutta.

respect to actualizing fullness of person. Tagore goes further, not denying the efficacy of rational inquiry nor eschewing the importance of external data. He is holding that study about religion as a human phenomenon has to include also the inward dimension of the individual by which we are all connected, hence a notion of truth as doing with respect to personal existence, with realizing a harmony in feeling and facts and in action through sympathy with the rest of creation (Tagore, 1972: 7).¹⁷ In this respect, his view is unlike approaches that employ historical and scientific findings or methods to bolster confessional or dogmatic positions. In fact, his conceptualizing of religion leads to revisiting a question on the relation of approach to subject matter. Is the subject matter demarcated or adapted to suit the scientific explanatory approach? Or, is there more to religion as subject matter that is left unexplored by an approach that is inadequate? In short, is the method reducing the substance of religion to a social science phenomenon, subtracting the sacred from the experience of the fullness of life, especially with respect to the *dharmic* traditions?

We have here a methodological concern, taking care not to fit subject matter to method or confuse the two, or to avoid disfiguring the subject matter in the application of the method. Tagore does not confuse the two. He takes the scientific approach in the study of religion to be a necessary step, but is underscoring that the study about religion is more. It is about the human person having a self whose superstructure arises out of an indeterminate depth or universal human Mind that understands all things, and by which we are all connected and hence could understand one another (Tagore, 1961a: 19ff.; Tagore, 1972: 69ff.). Becoming the truth, giving fullness of expression to life, is extending our limit in knowledge and creative imagination, plumbing that depth of self or personhood. In that sense, conformation of this inward truth of existence is other than in the language of words, namely the language of the Arts. This aspect of truth does not lend itself best to the methodology described and understood as the academic study of religion relying only on the scientific explanatory approach. Thus, for Tagore the study of the subject matter relies on a scientific-historical methodology and more: what is brought to studying art and philosophy as other versions of one truth that is known and felt. Perhaps for that reason the study of religion is better suited to remain in the discipline of the humanities or humane sciences rather than move to the social sciences. Its affinities with Tagore's view on the study of religion would undoubtedly become more evident and relevant in contemporary discussions in the West as well on the scope of and approach to the academic study of religion.

¹⁷ For Tagore the logical relation present in a proposition is the aesthetic relationship indicated in the proportion of a work of art affirm that truth consists not in fact but in the harmony of facts. See Tagore, 1971: 32.

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