



1. RELIGION AND *DHARMA*

*Gururbrahmā, Gururviṣṇuḥ, Gururdevo Maheśvaraḥ,
Guruḥsākṣāt Parabrahma Tasmai, Śrīguruve Namaḥ*

Glory to the *Guru*, whose teachings allow us to see the rope beyond the snake appearance; glory to the *Guru* who teaches us how to distinguish ourselves from the body, the mind, the *ego*; glory to the *Guru* who helps us to realize that we are the Absolute Non-dual Reality. What we are about to write could not be true without the previous instruction and approval of the *Guru*. Glory to the *Guru*, to the *Paramguru* and to the *Parameṣṭhi Guru*, inexhaustible sources of unfailing knowledge.

This series of brief articles begins with the purpose of clarifying the ideas of the *Hindū* Authorities about some basic concept of Western Traditions.

Usually the *saṃskṛta* term *Dharma* is translated with the English word “Religion”. This is because since their first arrival in India, Western people decided the equivalence between the two terms. After five centuries that use has been accepted also by the Indian *dhārmika* representatives.

Now we will demonstrate that the two words have different meanings, and therefore it is wrong to use them as synonyms.

The term Religion derives from the Latin *Religio*, and is composed by two different roots, *res*, i.e. “thing”, and the verb *ligo*, “to tie”¹. In this context it is not clear the real meaning of *res*, thing. It seems that *res* has been used to define all the citizens and the public goods included in the State apparatus². The State, in fact, was considered as a sacred entity, public ceremonies as rituals, public service as priesthood. The contacts with the Gods were mostly maintained through the State, the public deeds and the state magistracies.

The interpretation of *Religio* changed when Christianity became the Roman State Religion during the 4th century A.D. Christians gave the meaning of the Hebrew *datt* (Religion) to the Latin term. Thereafter *Religio* has been interpreted as the “thing” linking the believers to the unique God.

Now we have to consider what Religion is for Semitic Monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity and Islam:

- Religion is a social order revealed by God to a specific community of His believers. All other human beings not adhering to His faith live in a sinful condition and are excluded from the means of salvation.

¹ A similar term did not exist in ancient Greek. Romans regarded their concept of *Religio* as corresponding to the Greek term θρησκός (read *threskòs*), “Godfearing”.

² Indeed, Romans used the term *Res Publica* in order to define the State, regardless whether there was a monarchic, aristocratic or democratic regime.





- Religion is a pact between God and His community of believers excluding all other beings, sentient or insentient.
- The Religion highest purpose is to lead the deceased believer to salvation (the heavens).
- All the believers have to accept the dogmas, that is to say some statements of faith: it is forbidden to investigate on them through the reason³. Who does not accept a dogma is excluded from the religious community.
- All the believers must follow the same moral rules and conduct.
- All the believers must follow the same ritual prescriptions, without exceptions.
- Religion is an intervention of God in history through a revelation of some message to a human personality⁴.

At this point it is evident that Religion is completely different from *Dharma*. *Dharma* is not the fruit of a historical revelation, being free from time, and for this reason its true attribute is *sanātana*, permanent⁵. *Dharma* is also free from space condition, being the Order that rules the equilibrium of the whole Cosmos, in favor of every and each being, sentient and insentient. It harmonizes the needs of every being, family, caste and nation, establishing supple rules, behaviors and rituals adapted to everyone. It does not impose any blind belief; on the contrary, it encourages everyone to pursue knowledge. The *Hindū Śāstra* is not a revelation falling from Heaven to Earth on the whim of some God. This is the description of real experiences of the ancient *muktas*. Moreover, its highest ideal is not the permanence in some *loka*, but the identification with our Real Nature, the Brahman, to wit the Liberation from any *samsāri* bondage.

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³ For Judaism is dogmatic to believe in the Unicity of its God, in His Revelation and in the perennial pact between God and the elect people, the Jews. The dogmas for Christians are: the belief that God is One and Trine and that His son Jesus descended on Earth to be killed in sacrifice for the salvation of the believers. Another dogma is the ritual power of priests to transform bread and wine in real flesh and blood of Jesus Christ; whoever eats and drinks them reaches the salvation. For Muslims dogmas are that: God is One, the revealed *Qur'an* is eternal and that Muhammad is the last and conclusive of the Prophets.

⁴ There is a peculiar emphasis on this aspect, as if a historical fact would have some metaphysic relevance. Judaism was historically revealed by God to Moses. In the same way Christianity and Islam were founded respectively by Jesus Christ and Muhammad.

⁵ Also Buddhism is defined as *Ākālika Dharma*, timeless *Dharma*. However, from here a difficulty arises, because Buddhism has a historical founder, and Jainism as well. Even Tantrism differs somehow from the concept of *Dharma*, as it is the result of a revelation. Indeed “in this case there is the repulsive error of mutual dependence, as the authority of the *Āgama* [*Tantra*] rely on the omniscience of the God who has revealed it, and the omniscience of the same God leans on the authority of the revealed *Āgama* (*Brahma Sūtra Śaṅkara Bhāṣya*, II.2.38). Svāmī Satcidānandendra Sarasvatī comments as follows: “It is obvious that Śaṅkara refers with this to the *Bible*, the *Qur'an*, the *Zend Avesta* and to the sacred books of all the religions because they all claim that their inspired nature depends on the weak argument of the vicious circle, as happens for the *Āgamas* of Hinduism” (*Intuition of the Reality*, Holenarsipur, APK, 1955, pp. 8-9). We will answer these questions in a future article on this website.

