

Preface

This research paper discusses the historical roots of universalism in the Indian religious tradition.

The Hindu Roots of Universalism

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Universalism has been a very influential concept in Western thought, especially in the study of comparative religion. It is generally understood as the belief in one universal religious truth, which can be reached or understood in many ways. This approach has promoted a sympathetic and tolerant attitude towards the world's cultures and religions, and emphasized the values common to different faith traditions. While it is widely believed that universalism is a philosophy originating with Plato and Greek philosophy in the fourth century BCE, the concept is at least a thousand years older. We see universalism in the Rig Veda and the Upanishads, and it has continued to be an important concept in India to the present day.

Hindu interpretations of universalism have varied over time. This paper will examine the development of the idea of universalism in the Hindu context, discuss some relevant modern issues, and suggest some useful applications.

The earliest statement of universalism comes from the Rig Veda, usually dated around 1500 BCE or earlier. The Rig Veda I.164.46 states "Ekam sat vipra bahauda vadanti" or "to what is one, the sages give many names (titles): they call it Agni, Yama, Matarisvan." This statement is echoed in Rig Veda 10.114.5: "Him with fair wings, though only one in nature, wise singers shape, with songs, in many figures."

These sorts of statements have been interpreted in two major ways. From the perspective of non-dual (and thus non-theistic) Vedanta, following Sankara and other writers, they mean that only the One or *brahman* is true. The world of names and forms is *maya*, it is false or illusory in relation to *brahman*. Thus, all form and human ways of understanding are false, including the gods, who participate in the realm of *maya*.

However, the schools of dualistic or theistic vedanta have interpreted "Ekam sat" differently. *Brahman* is true, and the names and forms used by the sages are also true (as sages are speakers of truth). *Brahman* is present in a particular god, and all of the gods, as well as such figures as Prajapati and Purusha. This interpretation came to include symbols, visible signs of the invisible truth, such as space, wind, fire, *prana*, and certain mantras like OM.

Thus, the "Ekam sat" line has been interpreted to mean that only *brahman* is universally true, and everything else (including all gods) is *maya* or illusion. It has also been interpreted to mean that all gods are true, as they participate in or share in the reality of *brahman*. Thus one interpretation says all gods are universally false, and the other says all gods are universally true.

We may also note that the range of the statement has grown over time. It has gone from a metaphysical statement (all is one), to a pan-Hindu statement (the various Hindu gods represent the same reality), to a pan-religious statement (all religions follow one truth, though their prophets use different names and forms to represent that truth). Some commentators have debated the legitimacy of this expanded interpretation.

Both non-dual and dualistic interpretations of universalism are also present in the Upanishads. The major texts of these Vedic commentaries range in dates from about the eighth century BCE to the fourth century BCE, though other Upanishads were written later. We have the non-dual approach of "Neti, neti" or not this, not that" meaning that no physical object or mental concept fully embraces *brahman*. We still see this approach today in the practice of *jnana yoga*, in which illusion is peeled away by a process of denial and negation in order to reach ultimate truth.

We also have the theistic approach to Vedanta, in which *brahman* is the lord deep within the self, the inner controller within the heart, called Isvara or Isa. This approach may be

monotheistic, as we see in many Vaishnava interpretations of Vedanta, or it may be broader, including all gods. As the Mundaka Upanishad states, "This whole world is *brahman*, the hidden mover... within all that moves, breathes, and winks." (MU 2.2.1-3).

With Badarayana and other writers, this distinction developed into the doctrine of *nirguna* and *saguna brahman*, the first term meaning absolute existence without form, the second with *brahman* taking on name and form, or *nama-rupa*. While non-theistic Vedanta emphasizes the *nirguna* aspect as ultimate truth, most theistic Vedanta does not accept the idea of a god with form as an inferior understanding, and understands both aspects to be of equal value, or sometimes the god with form is superior to the god without form. A god who is *saguna*, with form, is able to love, and thus is easier for the human spirit to grasp.

In both the Upanishads and the brahmanas, we see a tendency to establish equivalences between beings and qualities apparently belonging to different levels and spheres. As Dandekar notes, one derivation of the word "Upanishad" is "placing side by side, equivalence, correlation."¹ Such establishing of equivalents and correlations between different spheres acts as a precursor for the later universalist equating of different gods and symbols, all being part of the same underlying reality.

Another complex early text on universalism is the Bhagavad Gita, the conversation between the god Krishna and the prince Arjuna on the battlefield. The Gita is a text which integrates many different Hindu schools of thought: yoga, bhakti, samkhya, vedanta, and others. As Miller notes, the text is usually dated by scholars as being written between 400 BCE and 400 CE.² ^{II} It is a chapter in the much longer saga of Indian history and myth, the Mahabharata.

On the topic of universalism, we have two opposing statements in the Bhagavad Gita. When Krishna discusses other religions, he says to Arjuna,

When devoted men sacrifice

To other deities with faith

They sacrifice to me, Arjuna

However aberrant (or strange) the rites. (BG 9.23)

Thus, whenever people worship other gods, they are really worshipping the one god, Krishna.

Krishna's identity with all gods is also shown in his revelation to Arjuna of his universal form, in which he shows himself as the sun gods, the gods of light, the howling storm gods, and thousands of others. This is universalism- all deities are really the one Ultimate Truth. However, two lines later he states:

Votaries of the gods go to the gods

Ancestor worshippers go to the ancestors

Those who propitiate ghosts go to them

And my worshippers go to me. (BG 9.25)

Here, people who worship other gods do not go to Krishna, they go elsewhere. This is even more specific in chapter 7:

But finite is the reward

That comes to men of little wit

Men who sacrifice to the gods reach the gods

Those devoted to me reach me. (BG 7.23)

Thus, the Gita has universalist ideas (Krishna is within himself all gods) and also non-universalist ones (that Krishna is different from other gods, who have different heavens).

With the rise of bhakti in the medieval period, universalist ideas tended to wane. The puranas (books which describe the stories of the gods) emphasized the importance of individual gods, and often gave arguments for sectarian belief and practice. We do find, however, the concept of the *istadevata*, the personal god who is individually chosen, which means that people can choose their own gods to worship. We also have the notion of *avatar*, in which deities can take on different forms. This implies that the deities of other religions can be true, because they could really be Hindu gods in disguise (thus, Buddha has been called one of Visnu's avatars).

There have also been bhakti mystics like northwestern weaver Kabir and the Tamil saint Nammalvar, who have included universalist statements in their poetry.³ As the Nammalvar said in his book the Tiruvaimoli 5, "Let each one offer worship as he deems fit and each one shall attain his God's feet. No God is inferior to any other God. Each one reaches his goal as his destiny has commended." Kabir uses the analogies of the ocean and waves found in the Upanishads. In Rabindranath Tagore's translation of his poetry:

The river and its waves are one surf :
 where is the difference between the river and its waves ?
 When the wave rises, it is the water ;
 and when it falls, it is the same water again.
 Tell me, where is the distinction ?
 Because it has been named as wave,
 shall it no longer be considered as water ?
 Within the Supreme Brahma, the worlds are being told like beads:
 Look upon that rosary with the eyes of wisdom.⁴

Kabir describes the *nirguna* god:

He is without form, without quality, without decay:
 Seek... union with Him!
 But that formless God takes a thousand forms
 in the eyes of His creatures :
 He is pure and indestructible, His form is infinite and fathomless,
 He dances in rapture, and waves of form arise from His dance.
 The body and the mind cannot contain themselves,
 when they are touched by His great joy.
 He is immersed in all consciousness, all joys, and all sorrows;
 He has no beginning and no end; He holds all within His bliss.⁵

Universalism returned as an important Hindu concept in the nineteenth century. Raja Rammohan Roy and Pandit Navin Roy began the Brahmo Samaj, and sought to recapture the "purity" of older Hinduism, by following the non-dual interpretation of Vedanta. Thus, the Samaj forbade polytheism, worship of statues, caste restrictions, and belief in avatars. They were to follow the universal truth of Hinduism, not the mythic accretions that had been added over time, and they would not allow "graven images" (as Roy phrased it) within their buildings. Roy's successor Keshub Chandra Sen sought to incorporate Christian ideals in the Samaj, and began to compile a Samaj text with passages from many different religions: Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Muslim. The Brahmo Samaj continues to exist, though it has declined in popularity, Western scholars tend to be interested in them as they are willing to convert Westerners to Hinduism, having developed a conversion ritual rarely seen in other forms of Hinduism. In some areas of India, the group is called Adi Dharm.

We also see universalism in the ideas of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, though their approaches were different. Ramakrishna Paramahansa of Dakshineswar was a Sakta devotee and temple priest. He danced and sang to the goddess Kali, and worshipped her all of his life. He followed Bengali Saktism as his primary practice, but he accepted the truth of other religions. He

spent a week or so experimenting with Muslim and Christian worship, having visions of Jesus and Muhammed, and he performed Vaishnava worship as well, identifying with Krishna and Radha. He did meditation with a Vedanta guru, and with a tantric female teacher. He was both a universalist and a passionate devotee of Kali. He gave several vivid metaphors for universalism: one was that water may be called “jal” in Bengali, “pani” in Hindi, “l’eau” in French, and “wasser” in German, but the water itself remains the same, regardless of its names. God is like this, called by different names, but ultimately the same.

His disciple Vivekananda had a more Brahmo Samaj approach to universalism. He felt that Hinduism should be rational, non-mythical, and activist, especially in the area of social service. He was not much interested in Ramakrishna's passion for Kali and worship of the goddess within statues- he took Ramakrishna's ideas of universalism and changed them, to bring them in line with his own interpretation of Vedanta philosophy. His ideas have come to dominate the Ramakrishna Mission, which he founded in Ramakrishna's honor. The last time I was in Calcutta, a swami of the Ramakrishna order told me that Ramakrishna was never a Sakta- he was only a Vedantin sage. I wondered if he had ever read Ramakrishna's biographies. This is modern rewriting.

On occasion, Vivekananda also espoused what we might call evolutionary universalism- that all religions are true, but that they are evolving towards a superior form. We see this approach today in some forms of liberal Christianity, and also in Bahai religion. As Vivekananda stated,

The idea of an objective God is not untrue- in fact, every idea of God, and hence every religion, is true, as each is but a different stage in the journey, the aim of which is the

perfect conception of the Vedas. Hence, too, we not only tolerate, but we Hindus accept every religion... knowing that all the religions, from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realize the infinite, each determined by the conditions of its birth and association, and each of them marking a stage of progress.⁶

Some writers have called this "reverse colonialism"- for Vivekananda is saying that while all religions are true, they all evolve towards Hinduism, which is most advanced. Many religions involve concepts of evolution, and they all tend to claim themselves to be at the high point of human evolution.

We also see universalism in the Hindu political sphere, mostly exemplified by Gandhi, who did not claim the superiority of a particular path. As he stated,

After long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion that 1] all religions are true; 2] all religions have some error in them; 3] all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism, in as much as all human beings should be as dear to one as one's own close relatives. My own veneration for other faiths is the same as that for my own faith; therefore no thought of conversion is possible.⁷ v

However, today there is conflict over the role of universalism in modern Hinduism. On one hand, it is the form of Hinduism followed by most Indians living and working in the West- especially scientists and engineers. It is "India for export"- the aspect of Hindu thought most widely known and respected around the world. As Carl Jackson notes in his book **Vedanta for the West**,

universalism is Vedanta's greatest attraction to Americans- its all-embracingness, its tolerance, its ability to reconcile religious differences.^{8VI} For some, it is the basis for a claim of Hindu superiority- Hindus being more tolerant, loving and forgiving than Christians, who only claim to have these qualities, but condemn their enemies to eternal torture in hell. We should note that no form of Hinduism believes in an eternal hell.

On the other hand, some Hindu nationalists say that universalism works against creating a Hindu state, and does not support Hindu devotional practice sufficiently, as it makes all religions equal. This conflict comes out of different interpretations of the term. I shall give these names, in order to clarify them.

We might call one understanding **intellectual** or **abstract** universalism. It is a philosophical position, rather than a religious belief. It states that all religions are equal, as all go to the same goal, and therefore one should not follow a particular religion. Here we have a universal truth at the expense of the particular, for the clarity and rationality of the philosophical position is preferred to the particularity of a specific belief and practice. When this is applied to religion, it can become anti-religious, forbidding particular religious practices in the name of tolerant humanism. From this perspective, practicing any religion constitutes religious prejudice or bias.

We might call the other understanding **religious or sectarian universalism**. In this approach, one religion is practiced, and others are accepted as valid and legitimate. It emphasizes the importance of particular or exclusive practice as a personal choice, but respect is given to other religions. In this approach, one can legitimately be both a Hindu or other religious practitioner and a universalist. One can support a religious nation, and still be a universalist.

This was also the real difference between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda- while Ramakrishna performed devotional bhakti practice and was also a religious universalist, Vivekananda avoided emphasis on devotion and ritual, and followed social service, good works and intellectual universalism.

I noted at the beginning of this paper that I would suggest some useful applications. In the field of Religious Studies in the USA, universalism has been under attack for over twenty years. The universalism followed by Eliade and other scholars of comparative religion was based on the idea of the sacred as the common goal of religions. Eliade may well have been inspired in this approach by his study of Vedanta with Surendranath Dasgupta.

This idea has been attacked by a group calling itself Postmodernist, or sometimes Deconstructionist. They claim that all religious understandings are political, that belief in any common or universal religious truth is superstition and intellectual colonialism, the imposition of Western religious ideas (such as universalism) on non-Western victims. No legitimate comparisons can be made between world religions, as religions are only responses to social history and alien to each other.

We should note that the term “universalism” has become complicated in West by additional associations. Western religious universalism tends to have two major meanings: one meaning refers to universal or common values, such as compassion, found in all religions. The other refers to universal salvation or reconciliation, that all people are not born damned to hell due to original sin, or sometimes that all sinners will repent in the end and be saved, even the Devil. This idea comes from the Greek *apokatastasis* idea described by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Greek Patristic writers. An intermediate claim is known as Restorationism, which states that sinners will spend finite time in Hell, but will ultimately be saved and go to heaven with

everybody else. There is also philosophical universalism, which tends to debate the existence of universal qualities which exist beyond particular appearances in the material world, and often cites Plato.

But the universalist exploration of common origins has been of great interest in the field of History of Religions. Scholars debated whether common religious ideas in the world came from a single geographical source (thus the popular nineteenth century concept of pan-Babylonianism, all religious ideas coming from a single source, which was Babylon) vs parallel development, where different ideas developed independently from each other in different cultures. Some scholars had geographical theories of religious origin, others had metaphysical ones.

While universalist theories of religious ideas were popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with writers like Carl Jung, Rudolf Otto, and Mircea Eliade, all of these writers have come under recent condemnation as “closet theologians,” who might have some sort of hidden religious belief by which they interpreted religions. In the United States, there is much debate about whether scholars should support religious views. The great figure in Philosophy is no longer Plato, today it is Aristotle, as well as the later Kant and Hume. Any writer in Religious Studies who claims a universalist perspective today will be subject to strident condemnation, for the trend is now historicism and arguments against theology.

Some suggestions for the field:

Indian scholars might note that India has its own tradition of universalism, and that it is not a Western Platonic or Eliadean idea forced upon India by colonialist thinkers. They can make clear that universalism is an indigenous category, thus giving permission to Western scholars to use

the concept in the field of comparative religion without fear of practicing intellectual colonialism.

Indian scholars with their long history of religious study and universalist philosophy are in a unique position to promote comparative religion and to argue against postmodernists who reduce religion to politics. Though India currently has the Bharatiya Janata Party and forms of Hinduism that emphasize nationalism and secularism, the Upanishads are still highly respected, and universalism is widely found among spiritual teachers and writers. It is not in newspaper headlines, but it is still influential.

The country of India now has virtually no programs in Comparative Religion, History of Religions, or Religious Studies in its universities. The tradition of universalism which respects all religions should lead to the formation of such programs, so that scholars in India can understand the language of modern comparative religious discourse and effectively participate in global religious conversation and scholarship.

To speak metaphorically, both the idea of universalism and the study of religion itself have become recent victims of cultural theory and postmodern reductionism in the USA. No writers there have been able to liberate them. India has the most ancient ideas in this area- perhaps scholars of India can contribute some contemporary voices as well.

Endnotes

¹ R. N. Dandekar, "Upanisad," in Mircea Eliade's 1989 *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 15, p. 208.

² Barbara Stoller Miller, trans. *The Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*, (NY: Bantam Classics, 1986) p. 3.

³ Kabir wrote of God being neither Hindu nor Muslim, but beyond all opposites.

⁴ *One Hundred Poems by Kabir*, translated by Rabindranath Tagore, poem 14

⁵ Ibid, poem 26.

⁶ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 4, Mayavati Memorial Edition, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), p. 187.

⁷ M. K. Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers: Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi as told in his own words*, (Paris: UNESCO, 1958), p. 60.

⁸ Carl Jackson, *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 100.