

IS THERE A COMMON CORE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE?

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PROFESSOR KEITH WARD

Introduction

In recent years many scholars in the study of religions have emphasised the differences between religions to such an extent that doubt has even been cast on whether it is useful to use the term 'religion' any more. It has been said that religious terms can only be properly understood within the context of their own 'language games', and that it is misleading to try to take them out of context and compare them with terms from very different traditions. If that is so, to speak of a 'common core' of religious experience, underlying the obvious differences between religious doctrines, is a doomed enterprise.

It is such an enterprise upon which I wish to embark. I wish to argue that there is something common to a great many major religious traditions, a range of core experiences that are recognisably similar beneath many doctrinal differences. I will set out my argument by considering two religious traditions that seem almost as different as possible. I will try to establish that, beneath the doctrinal oppositions, there are clear convergences of experience. So I hope this test case will provide a pattern for similar studies with regard to many other apparently diverse traditions too. Religions are different, and they often disagree on doctrines. But it is possible to identify a set of religious experiences that are very similar across diverse religious traditions, and this may help to support the thesis that there are deep and important convergences underlying the obvious disagreements between religions.

The two traditions I will consider are Vedanta and Christianity, both extremely complex and themselves containing many diverse strands. Nevertheless, they form identifiable religious traditions that are very often treated as in almost complete opposition. I will ask to what extent this is so, and to what extent they may rather be treated as complementary, or even as different ways of construing basically similar religious experiences and attitudes.

Vedanta

Vedanta is the name given to a set of schools of Indian religious thought, all of which have in common the fact that they base their teachings on a particular text, the 'Vedanta Sutras' of Badarayana. These Sutras in turn form an extremely cryptic commentary on the Upanishads, which are usually taken as revealed and inerrant scriptures. There are many different ways of interpreting the Upanishads and Badarayana's commentary on them, ranging from the non-dualistic system of Sankara to the wholly dualistic system of Madhva. The sheer range of diverse doctrines, even in this one strand of Indian thought, is bewildering. Even a cursory

knowledge of them makes it quite clear that one cannot characterise Indian religious thought as 'monistic' or 'pantheistic', as holding that the world is an illusion or as being somehow world denying. All these views can be found within Vedanta, but so can their opposites, so it is better not to try to generalise too much.

There is a whole set of differing views, but they do all claim to be reasonable interpretations of the Upanishads, and they do all accept the general Upanishadic conceptual framework of one spiritual basis of reality, and the development of an appropriate human relation to that Supreme Spirit by a long process of individual spiritual training, probably over many lives, leading to ultimate release from the chains of rebirth, desire and suffering.

Vedanta and Christianity

The Vedantic view can be put in a way which makes it sharply contrast with most understandings of Christianity. It might be said, for instance, that Brahman, the Supreme Reality, necessarily emanates worlds without beginning or end, and the cycles of existence repeat themselves again and again by a sort of inner necessity. Human liberation must be achieved individually by human effort alone, by a long process of renunciation and meditation. The world is a realm of desire and suffering, and each soul is born into the world an almost uncountable number of times, in all forms of animal and human life. The world has no positive goal or purpose, and the aim of the religious life is to obtain release from the cycle of reincarnation, so that there will be no more rebirth. When liberation is achieved, individual existence comes to an end, and one is finally absorbed in the undifferentiated unity of Brahman.

Put in that way, there does not seem much hope of achieving any sort of unity of Christianity and Vedanta, and there does not seem much point in trying. There are Vedantins who hold all the views just mentioned, just as there are Christians who believe that the vast majority of humans will suffer endlessly in Hell, that God has the power to will anything he pleases, without being limited by logical or moral principles, that only those who explicitly confess Jesus as their Lord and Saviour will be saved from Hell, and that Jesus will return to earth at any moment and the redeemed will receive their bodies back again to live for ever in a vegetarian Paradise.

It should be obvious that it would be a travesty to claim that Christians have to, or even normally do, believe all those things. In the same way, it is a travesty to claim that Vedantins would normally all accept the very limited views I have outlined for them.

Creation in Vedanta and Christianity

Among the vast range of options open to Vedantins, the following represents a rather different possibility. In Vedanta, the one spiritual basis of reality is construed as Brahman, the one and only self-existent reality whose nature is supreme wisdom and bliss¹. Brahman unfolds itself into an infinity of worlds, in such a way that each of these worlds, or universes, expresses something of the nature of Brahman, actualising its inner potentialities in many forms of finite being, without beginning or end.² One need not speak of eternal recurrence, however, and in fact such a notion comes to grief with acceptance that liberated souls are not reborn in this sort of universe — which entails that precisely the same universe will never recur. Rather, one may speak of endlessly new worlds expressing the play, or *lila*, of the Supreme Lord, all of which express new ways of manifesting divine love and compassion.³

It is true that worlds seem to emanate from Brahman by necessity, and to be explications of potentialities immanent in Brahman. But it is also true that such emanation is usually seen as willed by Brahman, and is not just some sort of unwilled 'overflow' of being.⁴ This is an intelligible concept of creation, in that each world is wholly dependent on Brahman for its existence, and Brahman intends that it should, as a whole, exist.

The idea that some creation is necessary is not wholly foreign to Christian thought, especially if one takes the view that God's essential nature as love can only be properly expressed by the creation of others to whom God can relate in love. And it may be a positively helpful thought, when considering the existence of suffering and evil, to suppose that there are internal necessities in the being of the Creator which limit the sorts of worlds that come into existence, making it impossible to produce a world without suffering that will instantiate the sorts of goodness this world does instantiate.

This dispute about the necessity of creation may seem rather abstract and remote, but it illustrates how large doctrinal divergences can spring from some small but crucial ambiguity of experience. In this case, it seems plausible to say that what lies at the root of the doctrines is a basic experience of one's existence as wholly dependent on a being of intelligence and bliss. That element is common to both traditions, and articulates a sort of experience that is recognisably similar in each. As the implications of this experience are articulated, however, small conceptual differences and differing rankings of various values lead in different speculative directions. One view might stress that love leads the divine being necessarily to express itself by creating many finite persons to love. Another view might stress that divine freedom means that nothing can be necessary to God. Both might agree that love (overflowing goodness) and freedom are essential to the divine being. But differing assessments of the relative importance of the two attributes, a different balance in the root experience of the freedom and love of ultimate being, may lead to different judgments about whether or not creation is necessary to God. These judgments in turn may influence the development of further doctrines, which drive traditions further and further apart, even though they begin from a very similar experience that the Divine Being is loving and beyond the constraints of causality.

Causality

The idea of causality itself leads to further divergences. The Vedantic notion of causality (*satkaryavada*) is that effects pre-exist in their causes, and are not distinct from them, so that Brahman is said to 'become' the world. This sounds quite different from the typical Christian notion of causality, which tends to distinguish effects from causes, and therefore say that the world as the effect of God's willing is different from the creator. Thus Indian traditions are sometimes seen as 'pantheistic', whereas Semitic traditions separate creation radically from the being of God. Perhaps, however, this springs largely from a verbal difference, a matter of different conceptual backgrounds, rather than a substantive disagreement. For while Brahman is said to be the 'material cause' of the world, this does not entail that everything in the world, including suffering and evil, is part of what Brahman essentially is. Brahman creates without changing in its essential being. It is 'the changeless among the changing'⁵ so it does not just 'turn into' a finite universe, indeed, since the world is in some sense a fall into illusion, it is actually as different from Brahman, the Wholly Real and perfectly blissful, as anything could be.

The substantive point is rather that nothing in the world is ever separated from Brahman. It exists solely by the support of Brahman, and Brahman is present to it at its heart. But the

Christian doctrine of God also holds that view, since God is omnipresent and every finite thing depends wholly for its existence on God. Moreover, for theologians like Thomas Aquinas, all effects pre-exist in God 'in a higher manner'.⁶ The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* primarily states that there is nothing other than God out of which the universe is formed. The Vedantic view agrees wholly with this, and it seems to me that the well-known view of the Upanishads that 'all this is Brahman' is reasonably interpretable as just another way of stating the Christian view of divine omnipresence and sole ultimate causality.

Experience and Interpretation

It seems that what is happening is that similar sorts of experience get interpreted in different conceptual frameworks, and this leads to different trajectories of development in doctrine. From the experience of unity with a reality of supreme wisdom and bliss there develop two different conceptual schemes. For one, a personal God stands apart from creation. For the other, creation and a God beyond personality are one. When these views are interpreted by more literal-minded and dogmatic believers, they come to seem contradictory. But they are both inherently more flexible than that, allowing many varieties of interpretation, exhibited particularly in the writings of those who are generally acknowledged to be the greatest theologians, like Sankara, Ramanuja, or Aquinas. And this variety allows us to trace a common experiential root of dependence on a self-existent reality of intelligence and bliss – that is linguistically expressed by different models.

The alleged pantheism of Vedanta provides a good example of this. Since Brahman is the only self-existent reality, it is true that all finite beings have no independent being, but are in some sense 'parts' of Brahman. Yet their identification with Brahman is far from simple. Finite souls are prey to greed and the delusion of separate independent existence. It is certainly not the case that, in all their greed and hatred, their suffering and despair, they express what Brahman essentially is. Within Vedanta, there are many different ways of construing the sense in which Brahman is identical with the finite soul or *jiva*.

One main option, represented by Ramanuja, is to see all finite souls as constituting the body of Brahman. Like the cells of a human body, they may have a certain autonomy. They may become sick. They may frustrate the overall will of the body. But insofar as the body functions as it should, they will co-operate in expressing the reality of the Supreme Self. There is no question of individuality being absorbed into some impersonal reality. Each soul exists eternally, and its destiny is to exist in conscious loving relation to *Isvara*, the Supreme Lord, not to be transmuted into some supra-personal unity.⁷ Moreover, if all liberated souls form the body of the Lord, they will live in a community of perfect harmony, of justice and peace. Both individuality and community are preserved and fulfilled in this form of Vedanta.

This world is a realm of suffering and conflict, in which souls are bound by desire and egoism. There are forms of Vedanta which do seem to take an unduly negative view of the finite world, to regard it as simply something to be escaped from. But Ramanuja and Madhva, together with most twentieth century Vedantins, insist on a much more positive view. After all, if 'all this is Brahman', it can hardly be wholly negative and pointless. In some sense, it may be seen as at least potentially divine. Consequently, while one may look for release from suffering and selfish desire, one may hope for a fulfilment of truly personal life in other forms of being beyond this one.⁸

In this form of space-time the body of Brahman is to some extent impaired. The desirable goal of human life is to obtain release from the sickness caused by egoistic desire, but it is

not simply to end individual life. Rather, it is to enter a more glorious realm in which the body of Brahman can function as it should, to express the wisdom and joy of Brahman itself in many finite ways. In the tradition, there are three main ways of obtaining such release or liberation. There is the way of *jnana yoga*, of renunciation and meditation, by which the mind is withdrawn from the world of sensual desire and focuses one-pointedly on the reality of the Supreme Self which lies within, in the 'cave of the heart'. There is the way of *bhakti yoga*, of devotion, by which one learns to love selflessly some particular expression of the Supreme Self, and thus transcend egoistic desire. And there is the way of *karma yoga*, of obedience and works, by which one seeks to obey the revealed will of the gods, and to practice compassion by service of others.

In each of these ways, the emphasis is on overcoming the sense of ego and achieving an awareness of the presence of the Supreme Self in all things, and of all things in the Supreme Self.⁹ This, I think, is the experiential base for the doctrinal scaffolding that has been built on it over many generations. The overcoming of possessive desire is usually thought to involve a long progress, before greed, hatred and delusion can be transformed fully into non-possessiveness, compassion and unitive knowledge of the Supreme Self. The doctrine of successive incarnations in different forms of being is a natural way of developing this insight. A critic may then complain that this leads to a do-it-yourself religion, where there is no room for divine co-operation. There are, however, many schools for which the grace (*prasada*) of the Lord may instantaneously deliver one from egoism into a loving relationship with the Supreme. While there is a stress on the teaching that each soul must reap the consequences of its own acts, there is also a strong element of the compassionate grace of the Lord, which ensures that a strictly retributive notion of justice may be transcended by the forgiving compassion of a Lord of love. It is simply untrue that Vedantins preach a gospel of salvation by works, and not of grace.

Reincarnation and Resurrection

Most Vedantin schools accept the general Indian religious cosmology of rebirth and Karmic Law, such that souls will be reborn on earth in many different bodies. But the deepest emphasis is on the necessity of progressing in goodness and insight, in forms of being beyond this earthly life. Rebirths may thus take place in lower (Hell) or higher (Heaven) worlds, as each soul follows its own path of enmeshment in desire and its consequences, or of liberation from desire and an infinite journey into Brahman. Belief in reincarnation on earth is not essential to Vedanta. What it is concerned to teach is that each individual life will, by its acts, shape its own future, in many forms of being which are subsequent to existence on this planet and in this form of space and time. There is no idea that anyone is condemned to Hell for ever, just because of their acts in one short earthly life, or that one may go directly to the presence of God, without the need for any further spiritual progress. Souls are bound to births involving suffering and loss, until, by their transcendence of the egoistic self, they achieve conscious union with the Supreme Self. Then they can continue an endless progress through infinite forms of knowledge and love. Such a view is virtually identical with that of the Orthodox Christian theologian Gregory of Nyssa, and it undermines any very radical opposition between the ideas of reincarnation and of resurrection.

If Christians follow the teaching of 1 Corinthians 15, they will look for resurrection in very different bodily forms — glorious and incorruptible — and in a very different form of space-time, where the laws of entropy have ceased to operate'.¹⁰ In that case, the resurrection world will be a different realm of embodiment, virtually a form of rebirth. If, in that world, there are places where unresolved human desires can work themselves out (a sort of

Purgatory or intermediate state), and if there is opportunity for growing in the knowledge and love of God, one has a concept of many afterlife worlds in which human souls can learn and progress which is not radically different from the Vedantic idea of forms of rebirth in which one's *karma*, the consequences of one's acts in this life, can be worked out.

The doctrines of resurrection and of reincarnation may seem to be, and can certainly be stated in a way that is, contradictory. Yet they both try to take account of the possibility of a continuation of life beyond this material world, of a progress towards a spiritual goal, and of an ultimate closer union with the Divine Being. And they are both susceptible of many interpretations within their own traditions. The idea of just one life followed by a body rising from the tomb, fixed for ever in a state of bliss or torment, is certainly different from the idea of many embodied lives, with the possibility of progress towards God for all after death. I am not trying to deny the possibility of disagreements. Yet the idea of resurrection as the gaining of a glorified 'spiritual' body, after a time of purgation – which is the classical Catholic view – is much nearer to a Vedantic idea of progress through many forms of being to an enhanced spiritual state.

Brahman and God

Brahman, though in some schools it is regarded as wholly without qualities and as beyond any description, also has a strongly personal aspect. If it has the nature of consciousness and bliss, then it has some characteristics of a personal being, possessing at least analogies to understanding and feeling. So the gulf between Vedanta and classical Christian theism is not so great after all.

What I have tried to illustrate is that the conceptual worlds of Vedanta and Christianity are not locked into separate, incommensurable compartments. They are inter-translatable, and indeed are talking about recognisably similar topics. There is the possibility of a common religious discourse, and of a good degree of mutual understanding and agreement.

Sometimes the personal theism of Christianity has been contrasted with what is called the 'impersonal monism' of Hinduism. As I have indicated, any alleged contrast made in these terms simply overlooks the richness of both Christian and Indian concepts of God. The Thomist idea that God is his own existence (*Deus est suum esse*)¹¹ is about as impersonal as one could get, and the 'dualistic' Vedanta of Madhva distinguishes finite souls and matter quite as sharply from God as any Christian could wish. There are many possible differences of religious belief, but they are not all between different and monolithic traditions. They exist equally strongly within traditions.

There are differences of tone between an Upanishad-based notion of Brahman and a Bible-based idea of God. In the Upanishads there is a continued interest in the nature of ultimate reality, and in the way to attain knowledge of it. There is a central concern with the true understanding of existence, or with a knowledge of the Supreme which will liberate one from ignorance and illusion. Consistently with this emphasis, the religious path is primarily one of sitting alone in meditation, aiming to withdraw the mind from sensory desires and achieve awareness of the inner nature of the self. This is a way of intuitive knowledge, and the Upanishads constantly teach that, beneath the multiplicity and suffering of the world there is one Being of Bliss, which is the inner reality of all things, and can be known in human experience.

The Hebrew Bible, by contrast, has almost no interest in speculation about the ultimate nature of reality. It speaks of a God who is active to liberate Israel from slavery and

oppression, and who makes a covenant of mutual loyalty and trust with human beings. This God gives a moral law, and if humans obey that law, God will grant them happiness and fulfilment.

For the Upanishads the Supreme is the inner reality of all things, to be known by the calming of passions and concentration of mind. For the Bible the Supreme is a demanding moral will, to be feared and loved as a subject who stands over and against every human will. Thus the central symbols of the divine in the Upanishads and in the Bible, symbols of the Universal Self and the Moral Will, are distinctive and different. They are not, however, incompatible, and a richer view of the Divine may be obtained if the main insights of both traditions are accepted. This again might be seen as a case of different key models being used to express a rather complex basic experience within which recognisably similar elements can be discerned.

Many criticisms have been made of the Biblical idea, pointing out its incipiently authoritarian and paternalistic character. God may be seen as a heteronymous tyrant, who is to be unquestioningly obeyed, and whose commands and purposes are arbitrary and inscrutable. This is a caricature, no doubt, but there have been enough authoritarian and paternalistic religious leaders to have given the caricature social embodiment in church institutions. The negative aspect of Biblical theism is its tendency to authoritarian intolerance. But its positive aspect is the importance it gives to morality, to the inescapable demand for social justice and personal compassion. The Bible unequivocally portrays the will of God as commanding justice and the development of a community of peace on earth. The faith of the ancient Israelites is not an otherworldly tradition in any sense, and it binds religion, personal morality and social justice together in a way quite distinctive among the religious cults of its time.

A similar tension of negative and positive aspects is characteristic of the Upanishadic traditions. Negatively, there have been constant criticisms, largely from Indian traditions themselves, that a stress on the sole reality of Brahman devalues the individual and leads to a lack of concern with social justice. Indeed, the widespread belief in reincarnation may give rise to the thought that people deserve whatever happens to them because of past-life wrong actions. When the *sanyassin* leaves his family and goes into the forest to seek liberation, this can be seen as a form of callous self-absorption, and the Upanishads have often been criticised for giving support to the caste system, which builds a permanent and inescapable inequality into social structures.

The positive aspect of Upanishadic thought is its stress that the religious life is a seeking for non-attachment, non-violence, universal compassion and inner calm and bliss. The way of liberation is a way of escape from egoism, and the teaching of the unity and omnipresence of the Supreme Self forbids the characterisation of others as damned or rejected by a judgmental God. All souls are parts of Brahman, and enlightenment is possible for them, if they will practice renunciation. There is here a pronounced sense of personal responsibility for one's own destiny, together with a sense that one is never truly estranged from the Supreme Self.

If the Vedantin and Biblical views are taken together, one can see how it is possible to have a commitment to social justice together with a personal search for wisdom, compassion and bliss. Two paths that have resulted from diverging trajectories of conceptual interpretation are able to converge again, yet without losing their own distinctiveness, when the basic experiences in which they are rooted are uncovered.

Similarity of Basic Experiences

The argument that there are such basic experiences lies, firstly, in focusing on the similarities between the concepts used to describe the ultimate object of religious striving and devotion (rather than on more peripheral doctrines that give increasingly detailed accounts of just how to attain this ultimate object). In each tradition, the striving is for unity with a self-existent being of supreme wisdom, compassion and bliss, and the path is one of liberation from possessive desire towards an overcoming of the egoistic self.

The argument lies, secondly, in a more detailed and dispassionate knowledge of the ways in which doctrines have developed historically by using the limited conceptual resources of their own cultures. This leads to a greater appreciation that one always speaks from a particular viewpoint, that no viewpoint sees things in a completely impartial and objective way, and that we owe many of the ways in which we formulate our beliefs to accidents of history and temperament.

The argument lies, thirdly, in the theological consideration that it is impossible to think that a God of universal love or compassion would not give some revelation of the divine nature and the ultimate human goal to people in many different cultures. The Indian complex of religious traditions is one major cultural source of religious beliefs, and the Semitic complex of which Christianity is part, is another. It seems reasonable to expect that there will be genuine disclosures of the divine in both traditions, and that there will therefore be significant similarities between them.

As one examines various traditions of revelation, it becomes obvious that they contain cultural features which are partly restrictive of vision, though also partly generative of distinctive insights. It does not seem rational to make a wholly privileged exception in one's own case, and so one is led to see one's own tradition as containing a genuine disclosure of the Divine, but as also containing many cultural and conceptual limitations, and so as standing in need of complementary insights from other cultures. A meeting of great complementary traditions may enable some of one's own cultural restrictions to become clear, and may transform the understanding of both traditions in a wider, though to be sure still limited, perspective.

Common Core of Experience

My argument has been that there is a common core of religious experience. It is 'core', in that it focuses on the most central and important element of religious belief, the nature of the supremely Real. The core is common, because there is an overlapping identity of description of the Real in both Vedantic and Christian traditions. Brahman and God both have the character of wisdom, infinity, intelligence and bliss. Both form the one and only self-existent, on which all other beings depend. The simplest hypothesis is that these descriptions refer to the same reality, and experience of that reality is experience of the same thing. Moreover, in this experience elements of union and of separation, of the emptiness and despair produced by possessive desire and of the bliss of oneness with a higher Self, are all present.

The common core is awareness of separation from a supremely perfect reality, and fitful awareness of a closer union with it, yet to be fully attained. Doctrinal descriptions differ in accordance with differing philosophical assumptions, differing evaluations of various ways of life, and differing affinities of feeling and sentiment. But in an age in which we are more aware of our own cultural standpoints, of the strange and seemingly accidental histories that

have brought us to where we are, and of the hitherto unappreciated richness of alternative traditions, there is a good reason to look back to the common core of experience that unites us. Without betraying our own traditions, there is hope that, in a world torn apart by religious hatred and distrust, we might be able to find and hold to a deep unity of purpose and motivation that enables us to live with many doctrinal differences in tolerance, mutual respect, and even mutual illumination. I have argued that it is relatively easy for Vedantins and Christians to do this. I hope the same will prove to be true of many of the religious traditions that are living options in the modern world, and that a sensitive and scholarly study of religious experience may help to make it true.

NOTES

1. *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*, 3, 9, 28. in P. OLIVELLE (trans.), *Upanisads*, Oxford, University Press, 1996, p. 52.
2. 'I alone am the creation, for I created all this', *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*, 1, 4, 5. in *ibid.*, p. 14.
3. 'Who alone ..., in whom the universe comes together at the beginning and dissolves in the end', *Svetasvatara Upanisad*, 4, 1, in *ibid.*, p. 259.
4. 'He [*Brahman*] had this desire: Let me multiply myself. Let me produce offspring' *Taittiriya Upanisad* 2, 6, in *ibid.*, p. 187.
5. *Svetasvatara Upanisad* 6, 13, in *ibid.*, p. 264.
6. AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, La, 4, 2, trans. Thomas Gilby, Blackfriars, 1964, p. 52.
7. 'Souls, matter and the Lord are essentially distinct', RAMANUJA, *The Vedanta Sutras*, trans. George Thibaut, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1962, in *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. Max Müller, vol. 48, p. 102.
8. 'The released soul ... abides in its true essential nature ... and may have experience of different worlds created by the Lord engaged in playful sport', RAMANUJA, *The Vedanta Sutras*, p. 764.
9. *Isa Upanisad*, 6 in OLIVELLE, *Upanisads*, p. 249.
10. 1 Cor 15, 42-44.
11. AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, La, 3, 4. Blackfriars ed., p. 30.

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THE AUTHOR

Professor Keith Ward is a Fellow of the British Academy. He taught philosophy at Glasgow, St. Andrews, Cambridge and London, and was appointed to the Regius Chair of Divinity at Oxford. He is now Gresham Professor of Divinity at Gresham College, London.

His publications include the series *Religion and Revelation*, *Religion and Creation*, *Religion and Human Nature*; *Religion and Community*; *God, Chance and Necessity*; *Concepts of God*; *God, A Guide for the Perplexed* and *The Case for Religion*.

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