

## Chapter 5

# Metaphysical Unity, Phenomenological Diversity and the Approach to the Other: Hindu Perspective on Xenophobia and the Hope for Human Flourishing

Ashok Vohra  
Department of Philosophy  
University of New Delhi

### Introductory Remarks

Hinduism contains no notion of the “other” - the one outside of the religion to which we belong, the “unfaithful,” the *kafir*. It posits that all the diversity we see and experience resides only at the level of phenomena. At the metaphysical level is absolute unity; everyone is nothing but Brahman. Consequently, there is no notion of the other in Hinduism. This leaves no place for hostility towards anyone; it spreads the message of love towards one and all and extends hospitality to aliens, even those who are critical of Hinduism and leave its fold.

The principles and practices of Hinduism are derived from Vedas and Upanishads, which are called *shrutis* (the revealed texts) and *smritis* (the remembered texts). As *Taittiriya Aranyaka* says, the Vedas “register the intuitions of the perfected souls” (i 2). Vedas are *apaurusheya* (not created); they are eternal and revealed. They are, as *Purushasukta* says: *dhata yathapurvam akalpayat* (presented without addition or subtraction), as it is revealed to the

*rishis* (the seers).

Man, his nature, growth, development, and realization (or emancipation) are the central concerns of the Vedic literature, which consists of Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas. Questions like: “What is the true nature of man?” “How can man realize this true nature?” “What is man’s destiny, and how can he achieve it?” and “Is spirituality the prerogative of only a few, select, gifted individuals, or is it the privilege of everyone?” are raised time and again in the Vedic literature. It is primarily with these concerns in mind that the Vedas, Upanishads, and other texts study nature, creation and other metaphysical and transcendental phenomena.

The Vedic literature presents an integrated scheme of life in which the metaphysical and the real are thoroughly merged. It upholds the unity of the macrocosm and the microcosm. Hinduism differentiates between empirical and transcendental existence, primarily because the Hindu religion, culture, and way of life are peculiar in that they do not distinguish between philosophy, theology, and religion. Therefore, Hinduism represents for its followers not just a religion but a total way of life. In order to work out the attitude in Hinduism towards the one whom we regard as the other—i.e., issues of hospitality or hostility—I have divided my presentation into three broad sections. After outlining the metaphysical presuppositions of Hinduism in the first section, in the second I apply the findings to show that *mlecchas*—the foreigners as well as the outcasts—cannot be treated as the “other.” Due to our *avidya* (ignorance) of the real nature of the concept of person, we treat him as the other and express hostility towards him. Once *avidya* is removed, we see everyone as an extension of ourselves. Through training of the mind, Hinduism removes *avidya* and teaches love and hospitality towards all the living and the non-living. Having done this in the third section, I trace the history of the term Hinduism to show that, because of its peculiar all-inclusive nature, it logically cannot maintain a place for hostility towards any one. Its tolerant and accommodating approach has the seeds of human flourishing and universal love and brotherhood.

*Compare Buddhist view on role of ignorance, p. 111.*

## 5.1 Metaphysical Presuppositions of Hinduism

In this section, I show that Hinduism believes that, underneath the diversity of class, caste, creed, skin colour, and language, lies an essential metaphysical unity. Each of us is divine in character; each has the same indwelling *atman* (self, soul).

Hinduism begins with the axiom that reality is one, the wise men interpret it in various ways (*ekam sat viprah bahudah vadanti*). The differences that emerge from the interpretations of the one ultimate reality by various philosophers, sects, and religions appears only at the surface level of terminology used by each of them in their own contexts and cultures, determined by their individual needs. Deep down, each religion maintains the quest for the ultimate truth. If we penetrate beneath the surface grammar of each of the expositions and interpretations of the ultimate truth or reality, we find that each of the sects or religions articulates one universal truth or reality. The apparent diversity is superficial; deeper down, one finds only unity.

Each interpretation of the ultimate reality represents a form of life. The Hindu believes that, class, caste, and religious affiliation have no unique spiritual function other than making many positive contributions to the individual's sense of identity, social support, and integration. This is because Hinduism upholds that "God can be realised through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Hindus believe that God Himself has provided different forms of worship. He who is the Lord of the Universe has arranged all these forms to suit different men in different stages of evolution and having different degrees of knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Hinduism therefore abhors the idea of superiority of any one religion over any other, because the believers in God cannot maintain that God has bestowed on them all wisdom and truth and appointed this small body of men as the guardians of the whole of humanity. Accordingly, "Religion is realisation: but mere talk—mere trying to believe, mere groping in darkness, mere parroting the words of ancestors and thinking it as religion, mere making a political something out of the truths of religion—is not religion at all."<sup>3</sup> With minor variations, the realized souls of all religions—big or small, ethnic, national, or even international—say: "Thou art the Lord of all, Thou art the heart of all, Thou art the guide of all, Thou art the Teacher of all, Thou art the saviour of all, and Thou carest infinitely more for the land and welfare of Thy children than we can ever do." The Hindu attitude towards the perfection or imperfection of every religion, which is the sole cause of the feeling of superiority in different religions, is best explained by Ramakrishna in the following way:

You may say there are many errors and superstitions in another religion. I should reply: Suppose there are. Every religion has errors. Everyone thinks that his watch alone gives the correct time. It is enough to have a yearning for God. It is enough to love Him and feel attached to Him. Don't you know that God is the Inner Guide? He sees the longing in our hearts and the yearning of our soul. Suppose a man has several sons. The older boy addresses him distinctly as 'Baba', or 'Papa', but the babies can at best call him 'Ba' or 'Pa'. Now will the father be angry with those who address him in this indistinct way? The father knows that they too are calling him, only they cannot pronounce his name well. All children are the same to the father. Likewise, the devotees call the one God alone, though by different names. They call on one Person only. God is one but His names are many.<sup>4</sup>

Thanks to these inclusive attitudes and the tendency to treat all faiths as equal, Hinduism projects no zeal in for proselytizing and no enthusiasm for conversion. Not being exclusive, it enables its followers not merely to respect all other religions, but also to admire them and to assimilate whatever may

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Vivekananda, "My Master," *The Complete Works*, Volume IV, pp. 182–183.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

be good in them. Because of its all-inclusive nature, conversion is alien to Hinduism. In fact, the Hindu mind finds the idea of converting the members of other faiths to its own—which seems so natural to the members of proselytizing religions—to be an act of moral, intellectual and cultural aggression. Conversion to Hinduism is sacrilegious. The Hindu attitude towards conversion is best encapsulated by Gandhi: “I do not want you to become a Hindu. But I do want you to become a better Christian by absorbing all that may be good in Hinduism and that you may not find in the same measure or not at all in the Christian teaching.”<sup>5</sup> The same is applicable to Islam, Judaism and other religions.

Hinduism considers all doctrines, all sects, all modes of prayers, all places of worship—temples, churches, and mosques—as peripheral to religion. It regards spirituality and its realization and an individual’s development and spiritual growth as the core of all religions. “For the Hindu,” according to Radhakrishnan, “the aim of religion is the integration of personality which reconciles the individual to his own nature, his fellowmen and the Supreme Spirit. To realise this goal there are no set paths. Each individual may adopt the method which most appeals to him, and in the atmosphere of Hinduism, even inferior modes of approach get refined.”<sup>6</sup> All religions and all sects and sub-sects, through their individual and sometimes unique, sometimes complementary, and at times even contradictory practices, try to bring out the latent divinity in each of us. Sri Aurobindo sums up this attitude of the Hindus in the following words:

To the Indian mind the least important part of religion is its dogma; the religious spirit matters, not the theological credo. On the contrary, to the Western mind a fixed intellectual belief is the most important part of a cult; it is the core of meaning, it is the thing that distinguishes it from the others. For it is formulated beliefs that make it either a true or false religion, according as it agrees or does not agree with the credo of its critic. This notion, however foolish and shallow, is a necessary consequence of the Western idea which falsely supposes that intellectual truth is the highest verity and, even, that there is no other. The Indian religious thinker knows that all the highest eternal verities are truths of the spirit. The supreme truths are neither the rigid conclusions of logical reasoning nor the affirmations of creedal statement, but fruits of the soul’s inner experience.<sup>7</sup>

It follows that a religion is a form of life that represents the soul of the people, its peculiar spirit, thought, and temperament. Rather than being merely a theory of the supernatural that we can adopt or reject as we please, it is actually an expression of the spiritual experience of the race, a record of its social evolution, an integral element of the society in which it exists. Once we consciously or unconsciously recognize these traits of religion, it dawns on us that, “Religion is not a simple spiritual state of the individual. It is the practice of the divine rule among men. The believer in God loves his fellow

<sup>5</sup> *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, volume XXXVII, p. 224.

<sup>6</sup> T. M. P. Mahadevan, *Outlines of Hinduism* (Bombay: Chetna Publications, 1971) p.vii.

<sup>7</sup> Birth Centenary Library, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, Vol. XIV, 1972, p.123–24.

men as he loves himself, seeking their highest good as he seeks his own, by redemptive service and self-sacrifice. He will put justice above civilisation, truth, patriotism.”<sup>8</sup> Once we realize this, the idea of a single religion for all mankind—one set of dogmas, one cult, one system of ceremonies that all individuals must accept on pain of persecution by the people and punishment by God—becomes the product of unreason and the parent of intolerance.

In Hinduism, there is no “other.” There is no place for the fear of or hatred of the other; there is no need to be inhospitable to the other; there is no room for xenophobia. Everyone is nothing but an extension of oneself or one’s creed. The “other” results from looking at reality in a different way, from a different perspective. Once the multiplicity of perspectives and standpoints is admitted, no competing views remain, because all of them merge into one and become complementary. The other and his creed is embraced into one’s own. The other is regarded as the one belonging to a different *jati*. By making the other realise that *aham brahmasmi, tat tvam asi* (I am *brahman* so art thou), Hinduism becomes all-encompassing and totally inclusive.

### 5.1.1 Hindu View of a Person

The concept of person in the Hindu tradition differs radically from how it has developed in the Judaeo-Christian traditions. In the Hindu tradition man is essentially divine (*amritasya putrah*) the child of the immortal bliss. In fact, he is *Brahman*, the ultimate reality itself. *Taittiriya Upanishad* describes Brahman as “that from which all these beings are born, by which after being born they live, and into which they merge when they cease to be.” A man is essentially *nitya, shuddha, buddha, mukta Paramatman* (the eternally pure, awakened and free Self).

Hindu tradition recognises that man lives in an external and an internal environment. He forgets his true nature, because of the external environment in which he lives. His body is a part of the external world, and his spirituality constitutes his internal world and represents his true potential. As long as man is under the sway of his sensate nature, he allows himself to be conditioned by the body, the senses, and the fruits of their actions. He is affected by the pulls of lust, fear and greed, with the result that he is lost in the world of the ephemeral and the perishable. But he has the capacity to transcend this situation and to explore the world of spirituality, which leads him to freedom from the sensate nature, offers fearlessness, and provides him breadth of vision, sympathy and immortality. Hinduism views man both as an actor and a spectator, as both *drishya* and *drik* (the object and the subject). In order to know himself, he must transcend himself. By such transcendence and the ability to realize the truth, he is able to know that he is *atman, brahman* and therefore, he is essentially infinite and immortal.

Once man ceases to look at himself as a conglomerate of different senses alone, he realizes that he is not merely a physical entity. He shares his sensuality with other primates, and his unique distinguishing characteristic is spirituality. As a physical entity, like other physical entities, man is acted upon and governed by forces outside him. Sensate view thus looks upon man from the outside and is very narrow. It is finite and trivial, because life at the level

<sup>8</sup>S. Radhakrishnan, *The Religion We Need* (Banaras Hindu University, 1963) p. 25.

of ego “is only a shadow life.” It ignores spirituality, which, as noted above, is the most profound distinguishing feature of man. Spirituality lies in his capacity to delve deep into himself; to look at his own self from within and not only from without.

This sensate view of man is restricted to the fact that the sense organs can give us knowledge of the external world alone. Being subject to physical laws, its findings are subject to change. The senses do not and cannot provide knowledge of what is eternal and abiding. Shankara in his commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, II.1.20, says:

... this self of man, which is of the same category as the supreme Self, but separated from It like a spark of fire (from the fire) has entered this wilderness of body, sense-organs, etc. and although really beyond all relativity and finitude, takes on the attributes of the body and the sense-organs, which are characterised by relativity and finitude, and thinks itself to be this aggregate of body and sense-organs, regards itself to be lean and stout, happy or miserable—for it does not know itself as the supreme Self.

This Supreme self, the *brahman*, the *Prajapati*, according to *Isha Upanishad* verse 8, is “the self existent, one, is everywhere. He is the pure one, without a subtle body, without blemish, without a gross body, holy and without a taint of sin. He is the all-knowing, the all-encompassing. He has duly assigned their respective duties to the eternal *Prajapatis* (cosmic powers).”

The differences among persons belonging to different religions, tribes, classes and castes are superficial; deeper down exists only unity, identity; each is nothing but *Brahman*, each is *atman*. In fact, like the *rishi-s* of the *RigVeda* (IV.40.5) and *Katha Upanishad*, the person who sees everyone like himself (*atmavata*) as the manifestation of one true reality sees the identity of all beings. For him there is no other. He realizes that the *atman* that is in the sun, the air, and the fire is also in man, in gods, in sacrifices, and in the sky. The same is true for the aquatic creatures, insects, reptiles, and mammals, as it is for the fruits of the sacrifice. It is the rivers flowing from the mountains. It is *ritam*, truth, and *mahat*, great. It is the infinite. Shankara summarizes the above in his commentary on the second verse of *Katha Upanishad* as follows: “Atman, verily is not the indweller of the ‘city’ of only one body; what then? He is the indweller of all the cities... The meaning of the verse is that the entire universe has only one Atman; there is no possibility of a plural in atman.” It is not as if one starts seeing unity in all living and non-living beings or one identifies oneself with the others only after such a realization; this identity is there even before that awareness comes to fruition. Regardless of one’s knowledge of this unity, every person is really one with the universe. In his commentary on I.iv.10 of *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Shankara says, “Even before knowing Brahman, everybody, being Brahman, is really always identical with all, but ignorance superimposes on him the idea that he is not Brahman and not all, as a mother-of-pearl is mistaken for silver, or as the sky is imagined to be concave, or blue, or the like”

By treating everyone as ultimately *atman* or *brahman*, the Indian seers have advocated equality of all men and women, old and young. That the Upanishads believe in the sameness of everyone can be seen from verse IV.3

of the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, “Thou art the woman, Thou art the man; Thou art the youth and the maiden too; Thou art the old man tottering on his stick. Thou art born in diverse forms.” Since the same *atman* dwells in all, none is superior and none is inferior. This condemnation of the idea of separateness and the idea of the essential unity and kinship of men and other creatures of the universe recurs in the Vedic literature repeatedly. Verse 6 of the *Isha Upanishad* also emphasises that “the wise man who realizes all beings as not distinct from his own self, and his own self as the self of all beings, does not, by virtue of that perception, hate anyone.” Accordingly he realizes that the differences in the universe perceived by the senses reside only at the surface level, but deep down, regardless of the positions held by the individuals—the social or other functions performed by them; the *varna* or *jati*, class or caste to which they belong; or the money earned by them—is absolute unity. At that level there is an essential identity among all men. Shankaracharya has very aptly explained this in Verse 244 of his *Vivekachudamani*: “One man with the *upadhi*—limiting adjunct of the dress and function of governance is called a king; another man with the different *upadhi*, and function of the lowest military rank is called a soldier. But when the particular *upadhi* of each is taken away there will remain neither king nor soldier, but only man.” When we realize that all the differences are only apparent and not real; that they belong only to the “outer” and not the “inner,” and that the “inner” is common to all, we realize the essential oneness of all mankind. Once this realization dawns on us, the sense of “otherness” disappears and with it hatred, delusion and sorrow.

For a person who knows and has realized that underneath the vast superficial diversity lies an essential unity of all beings, “there is no difference between service of man and worship of God, between manliness and faith, between true righteousness and spirituality. All his words, from one point of view, read as a commentary on this central conviction.”<sup>9</sup> For such a person, the notions of “mine” and “thine” (the source of separateness), *raga* (attachment), *dvesha* (covetousness), and *vaira* (animosity) leading to hatred, violence, and war is non-existent. He has an attitude of equanimity and friendliness towards all; he is at peace with himself and with his environment. Thanks to this *manasaivedam aptavyam*, the right training of the mind, which emphasises seeing oneself and others as Brahman, a Hindu does not care about the caste, creed or religion to which one belongs, provided that one achieves excellence and has something to contribute to his own and to the corporate life. This is evident from the high esteem in which Mother Teresa, Sister Nivedita (born Margaret Elizabeth Noble), The Mother (born Mira Richard), Annie Beasant, and Father C. F. Andrews, who were all Christians, and several Sufi Saints are held by the Hindus.

## 5.2 *Mlecchas* as the Possible “Other”

In this section, I show that the Hindus actually put into practice their doctrine of unity in diversity. This can be best seen from their treatment of the foreigners with whom they came in contact long ago. They called the people

<sup>9</sup>Sister Nivedita, Introduction, *Collected Works of Vivekananda*, pp. xiii–xiv.

whose origins were traced to lands outside Bharta (modern day India), who could not use the Sanskrit language and who belonged to an alien culture, by the term *mlecchas*. In what follows, I deal with the notion of otherness in the classical Hindu literature by examining the concept of *mleccha*. I show that, though the surface grammar of the term *mleccha* gives one an impression of the other and some kind of hostility towards him, upon deeper analysis we find that *mleccha* is a value-neutral cultural term.

Though in the course of history Hindus came in contact with many cultures, religions and civilisations, they never made any special effort to explore or understand them; indeed, they were almost indifferent to their principles and practices to the point that they barred their followers from crossing the boundaries of Bharata or Aryavarata. *Brihadarnyaka Upanishad* 1.iii.10 says, “one should not approach a person, nor go to that region beyond the border lest one imbibe that evil, death,” because contact with these persons and the region they inhabit has a polluting effect on all those who come in contact with them and go to the places inhabited by them.

They called the places located outside their own territory Asura *pradesh*, *mleccha pradesh* (the area inhabited by the barbarians, the uncultured populace). *Manusmriti* II.23, differentiates Aryavarata from the *mleccha Pradesh*: “That land where the black antelope naturally roams, one must know to be fit for the performance of the sacrifices; (the tract) different from that (is) the country of the *mlecchas* (barbarians). Describing the traits of the *mlecchas* it says in X. 45: “All those tribes in this world, which are excluded from (the community of) those born from the mouth, the arms, the thighs, and the feet (of Brahman), are called Dasyus whether they speak the language of the *mlecchas* or that of the Aryans.” This means that all who do not believe, at least in some measure, in the philosophical doctrines of *avidya*—ignorance, *karma*—action, *punarjanma*—rebirth, and *moksha*—liberation, which form the kernel of Hinduism and other religions of Indian origin, is a *mleccha*. In addition to these philosophical principles, anyone who does not believe in the social norms prescribed by different *smritis* and popularly known as varnashrama *dharma* (duties relating to the class, caste and the stages of life) is also a *mleccha*. But from this it does not follow that these are the essentials of Hinduism, because no two *smritis* agree about the content of each of them. For example, there is no universal agreement, other than the use of the word, about what *dharma* itself is.

The Hindus were directed neither to have a dialogue with the *mlecchas*, nor to learn their language, nor to visit their dwelling places or their countries. This was done to maintain ritual purity and to preserve the Hindu culture. Free intermixing in a primarily oral tradition would certainly have affected the distinction maintained by the Hindus between the sacred and the profane. A free intermixing would certainly have ruined the age-old *smriti*, as well as the *shruti* tradition. It would have corrupted if not destroyed their *sanmskaras* (sacraments). *Sanmskaras* include education, cultivation, training, refinement, perfection and grammatical purity, cognitive tendency (which gives rise to recollected knowledge), purificatory rites, sacred rites or ceremonies, consecrations, sanctifications, and the like. Thus the directive to avoid the *mlecchas* was practical and not due to their being considered less than part of the divine. Swami Ramakrishna put succinctly the dislike for for-

eigners thus, “All is God, but tiger-God is to be shunned. All is water, but we avoid dirty water for drinking.”

Apparently the term *mleccha* had nothing to do with those who did not follow the principles and precepts of *Sanatana dharma* or *Vaidika dharma*. Were it so, the Charvakas, the Buddhists and the Jainas would have also been called *mlecchas*, because none of them believes in the authority of the Vedas. But nowhere in the cipher of the canonical literature of the Hindus have they been described as *mlecchas*. Rather we find that every effort is made to show how they can be accommodated within Hinduism. On the contrary, we find that the Buddhist and Jaina canonical literatures use the term *babbhra* and *milakkhu* respectively to refer to those who are outside their fold. This shows that all the religions of Indian origin treated foreigners differently from their own class and that the notion of cultural otherness was deeply rooted in them. Jainas classify *mlecchas* into those who are “born in other continents” (*antaradvipaja*) and those born in Bharata (*karmabhumija*) Jaina *Acaranga-sutra* II.3.1.8 describes *mlecchas* (*milakkhu*) as “the jungle tribes and other groups of outsiders.” The “other group of outsiders” apparently refers to the Yavnas (Greeks), Sakas (Scythians), Kushanas (Central Asian nomadic tribe), Turks (Iranians), Hunas (Ephthalites) and Portuguese, French, British, Persian as well as nationals of other countries who visited India either as travellers or traders or even as conquerors.

Often the term *mleccha* is used to connote one who cannot use the Sanskrit language properly or who suffers from the linguistic deficiency in the lingua franca of the native Hindus. He is one who speaks confusedly, indistinctly or barbarously. A person who can not see contradictions in his own speech (*virodha adarshane*) is also a *mleccha*. In his *Dharma Sutra*, Baudhayana defines *mleccha* as a person who consumes beef, speaks contradictorily, and is devoid of all conducts. Patanjali, in his *Mahabhashya*, says that, in order to avoid falling down to the level of *mleccha*, one must learn the grammar of the Sanskrit language. He says, “*mleccha ma bhuma-ity adhyeyam vyakaranam.*”

All foreigners who did not know Sanskrit were called *mlecchas*. Accordingly, it served as an ethno-cultural term used to distinguish the nobility and aristocracy of character and the temperament of the natives of Bharata from those who belonged to other regions and were not proficient in Sanskrit. It was never used in the sense of “the other,” as we understand in the context of Semitic religions. In the Islam, the other refers not to the cultural other but to the one who belongs to a different religion. He is a *kafir* and needs to be redeemed through conversion. One is either hostile to him or extends hospitality to him in order to win him over; one cannot be indifferent to him. In Hinduism, one is indifferent to the other’s beliefs, faith and ways of worship; the other is not at all necessary for establishing one’s own identity.

That is why, as J. L. Mehta puts it, “Hinduism has at no time defined itself in relation to the other, nor has acknowledged the other in its unassimilable otherness.” On the contrary, Hinduism has always attempted to assimilate the foreigners into its fold. The exact procedure of giving the *mlecchas* a place in the *chaturvarnaya* (fourfold classificatory) system, or purification (*shuddhikarana*) has differed from time to time and from text to text. Therefore, only a general outline of the process adopted for such assimilation can be described. There are no set rites and ceremonies associated with such assimila-

tion. Manu (X. 43-44) regarded the *mlecchas* to be the offspring of inter-caste marriages or as originally belonging to the *kshatriya* class and losing their status either due to heretical tendencies or non-observance of sacred rites. *Mahabharata* (XII. 65.13.22) elaborates the duties of the *mlecchas*—Yavnas, Shakas, Tusharas, Pahlavas, Chinas and other alien people. These are obedience to parents, preceptors, kings, and hermits; performance of Vedic rites; digging of wells; making of presents to the *dvijas* (twice born); abstention from violence of any kind; absence of wrath; truthfulness, purity, and peacefulness; maintenance of wives and children; and performance of sacrifices in honour of the *pitrs* (ancestors); and performance of *paka-yajnas*. This shows that the *mlecchas* were also expected to perform the same normal acts of piety as the Hindus.

During the Bhakti period, the barrier between the native Hindu and the *mlecchas* (the outsiders) was further broken down. *Bhagavata Purana* II.4.18 clearly states that taking resort to Vishnu and his devotees is enough for the purification of the Kiratas (Mongoloid or Sino-Tibetan), Hunas, Andhras, Pulindas, Pukvasas, Abhiras, Suhmas, Yavnas, Khasas, etc. According to Ramanuja, to be eligible for liberation, all that is required of everyone, may he be a *mleccha* or a *shudra*, is wholehearted surrender (*sharanagati*).

The Hindus hold the *mlecchas* in high esteem and not with contempt, even though they dislike their way of life. They are ready and willing to learn from the *mlecchas* whatever they know better than the Hindus. The attitude of Hindus towards the *mlecchas* is best summed up in the *Gargi Samhita*. Acknowledging that the Yavanas have a better knowledge than the Hindus in astronomy and are more skilled in astronomical calculations, the *Gargi Samhita* implores the Hindus thus: “The Greeks are *mlecchas*, but amongst them this science is duly established; therefore even though they are *mlecchas* they are honoured as *rishis*; much more than an astrologer who is a Brahmana.” Shabara and Kumarila, the two chief exponents of the Mimamsa school of Indian Philosophy, also assert that the *mlecchas* have equal and, in some cases, superior skill and proficiency in some secular (*laukika*) matters—that is areas in which there can be no real conflict with the sacred tradition of the Hindus—and worldly activities, like agriculture and the catching and rearing of birds. Therefore, there is nothing wrong in learning from them these techniques and entering into empirical transactions with them. This capacity of the Hindus to learn from everyone is based on the maxim: *Antyadpi param dharmam* (“Supreme knowledge can be learnt even from the man of low birth”).

From this, it is clear that a Hindu is keen to learn from anyone, regardless of his class, caste, or origin. There is no sense of hatred; at the most, a sense of indifference and no theoretical hostility towards the other. If for some reason one can not be friends with the foreigner, or can not rejoice (*mudita*) in his achievements, one must have compassion (*karuna*) towards him. If that is impossible, one must ignore (*upeksha*) him but never have feelings of animosity towards him.

Even in their epistemology and metaphysics, the Hindus distinguish between the *vyavaharika* (phenomenal, empirical level of existence, truth and knowledge) and the *paramarthika* (the transcendental or supra-phenomenal plane of existence, truth and knowledge). Only at the *vyavaharika* level do we

see the world of *nama* and *rupa* (name and form) the plurality of selves and things. We see these differences because of *avidya* (ignorance) and *maya* (illusion). The knowledge we derive here is the result of our senses; it is *apara vidya*, lower knowledge. At this level of existence, we find multiplicity: there are “others,” there are *mlechhas*, there are *shudras*, there are outcasts, and the like. But at the *paramarthika*, that is supra-phenomenal level, there is no multiplicity, only unity, oneness. There is neither self nor the absence of self. Once the *para vidya* (higher knowledge) dawns on an individual, he becomes *mukta* (free from all dualities). For him there is no “other.” With the help of the distinction between the *vyavaharika* and *pramathika* levels of existence, Hinduism is able to explain the differential treatment it recommends to its followers against the *mlecchas*. The differential treatment to different people belonging to different creeds, castes, and classes—as per the prevalent social laws and customs—is applicable only at the phenomenological level, but once one transcends that, there is no difference between one and the other. Like the salt or sugar dissolved in water, all of us at that level are one.

Thanks to this distinction between the *vyavaharika* and *paramarthika*, Hinduism has been able to maintain its non proselytising character; it neither seeks nor avoids any doctrine, practice, or custom but assimilates everything that comes its way. For example the *Bhavishya* (Future) *Purana* narrates the story of Christ and the development of Christianity and the downfall of some of the practices of Hinduism. It also narrates briefly the story of Prophet Muhammad. Both these stories are told in ways that portray both Christ and Muhammad like the other incarnations of the Hindu pantheon, the incarnations of Narayana, the Supreme Being itself. It asserts that Nyuh worshipped the Supreme in the form of Lord Vishnu, who in turn blessed him with prosperity and extensive progeny. It then narrates the lineage of Nyuh in the same manner in which the genealogy of the Hindu kings is given. This shows how keen the Hindus are to assimilate all the “other” along with their religions into their own.

### 5.3 The Term “Hinduism”—An Historical Survey

This tendency of Hinduism to welcome one and all to its fold unconditionally and to assimilate them is best illustrated by the analogy of the bull. According to Vivekananda, Hinduism is like the bull on whose horns a mosquito sat for a long time. The bull apparently was not affected by his presence. But eventually the bull’s conscience started troubling him. He said to the bull, “Mr Bull, I have been sitting here for a long time, perhaps I annoy you. I am sorry, I will go away.” But the bull replied, “Oh no, not at all! Bring your whole family and live on my horn; what can you do to me?” In this section, I show that all-inclusive attitude of Hinduism is a product of its own history.

Let me begin with an explanation of the use of the term “Hinduism.” The word “Hinduism” is derived from the term “Hindu.” Both are of relatively recent origin. Traditionally the two have no meaning, as they are not found in the ancient literature or in the scriptures of the people to whom they refer and to the religion they connote. These names were used by foreigners—earlier by the Persians, to refer to the people living in the geographical region

lying on the eastern side of the river Sindhu, and later by Muslims, to refer to the people who had not converted to Islam. The use of the terms Hindu and Hinduism were thus developed from geographic designations into religio-cultural ones (as occurred with so many other geographic designations over the centuries) by outsiders who were not the practitioners of the religion or the way of life which was meant to be described by it.

Historians like Jackson<sup>10</sup> have traced the earliest mention of the term Hindu to the first chapter of *Zend-Avesta*. In the chapter, entitled *Avestan Vendidad*, the fifteenth of the domains created by Ahur Mazda was called *Hapta Hindu* (Seven Rivers) a region of abnormal heat. Similarly, *Rig Veda* VIII, 24, 27 describes this geographic region as *Sapta Sindhavas* (Seven Rivers). The use of the term Hindu by foreigners has been dated by some historians like H.W. Rawlison<sup>11</sup> to c. 518 BC. According to historical records, the term Hindu continued to be used to refer to the inhabitants of the geographical region until the early twentieth century in phrases like “Hindu Christian” (as opposed to “Christian”) and “Hindu Muslim” or “Hindu-Mohammedans” (in contrast to “Arab Muslim” or “Turkish Muslim”) were in vogue.

The inhabitants of the eastern side of the river Indus had no name for their own religion. One reason was that, to the practitioner of Hinduism, one’s temporal and spiritual life should form one integral and harmonious whole. To separate them is to destroy their organic unity. “All life to him was religion and religion never received a name from him, because it never had for him an existence apart from all that had received a name.”<sup>12</sup>

According to J. N. Mohanty, this religion “may best be called a natural religion,” because it was not founded by a prophet or based on a book produced at an identifiable point of time. Moreover “the corpus of the texts of this religion is much unlike the Bible and the Qu’ran. Rather, the texts record everything that the community knew (*vid* = to know) and serve as the founding texts from which the entire culture began. Not having an author, the texts—compiled into the various Vedas in course of time—came to be characterised as *apaurusheya* (not having a human author).”<sup>13</sup>

The other and stronger reason for not having a name for this religion was that it was the most universal and unique religion. It was the most universal, as it had no beginning in time and no founder. It was the first religion followed by humankind. It is *sanatana* (perennial and eternal). It has been there since eternity. It is unique in the sense that it is not dominated by theology and gives ample freedom to the followers in matters relating to faith, belief, and way of religious life. As a result, it is all-inclusive and represents a comprehensive way of life. In the words of Shri Candrashekharendra Sarasvati, the sixty-eighth Shankaracharya of the Kanchi Kamakoti-peetha, the reason for this religion not having a name is:

Other religions did not exist before the time of their founders.  
Ours is a religion which existed long before the founded religions.

---

<sup>10</sup>Jackson, A.V. Williams, “The Persian Dominions in Northern India Down to the Times of Alexander’s Invasion”, *Ancient India*, ed. E. J. Rapson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922) pp. 324–325.

<sup>11</sup>*India: A Short Cultural History*, (London: The Cresset Press) pp. 53–54.

<sup>12</sup>Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Aspects of Our Religion* (Bombay: Bhartiya Vidya, 1966) pp. 1–2.

<sup>13</sup>*Classical Indian Philosophy*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 125.

Obviously, it was the only religion in the world ministering to the spiritual needs of the mankind as a whole. There was no second religion from which it was required to be distinguished. Hence there was no need for a name for it. It was, and even now continues to be nameless.<sup>14</sup>

The above argument relies heavily on the presupposition that a unique thing—a thing which does not have any other in the same category—does not need to be named, because the purpose of naming is to distinguish one thing from another. Individuation is needed only when more than one thing belongs to a particular category. Whether one agrees with the above argument or not, the fact remains that there was no name of the religion practised by the habitants on the eastern side of the Indus, the “Hindus.”

Bharata is the term used in the classical Indian literature to represent the geographical region in which the Hindus lived. *Vishnu Purana* II.3.1 describes the geographical boundaries of Bharata thus:

*Uttaram yat samudrasaya himadreschaiva gacchatam  
Varsham tad bharatam nama bharati yatra santatih.*

(That is, the area, which is to the north of the sea and extends up to the Himalayas, is called Bharata and its inhabitants are known as Bharatis.) From this it can be concluded that not only the foreigners identified the inhabitants of this region by the geographical region occupied by them but even the local inhabitants described themselves in terms of the geographical contours of the physical area they occupied, not the religion they practised.

However, in the course of time, when various religions (*panthas*) came into being and came to be known by the names of their founders or inspirers, the ancient Indians felt the need to distinguish their mode of individual, spiritual, ethical, and social life from the newly founded religions. They called their religion *Sanatana Dharma* (eternal religion). Since their individual and social way of life was determined by the teachings of the four Vedas (*Rigveda*, the book of adulations; *Yajurveda*, the book of rituals; *Samaveda*, the book of songs; and *Atharvaveda*, the book of wisdom), the Hindus’ sometimes called their form of life Vaidika Dharma (the Dharma which is based on the doctrines contained in the Vedas and which derives its authority from them). “Dharma” means “to sustain,” “to maintain,” and “to support.” It encompasses the duties, obligations, and justice in the given society and lays down the rules of conduct and guide for action. In short, it represents a way of life or what Wittgenstein calls “a form of life.” In fact, the use of the term “religion” in the Indian context is itself problematic, because there is no corresponding term in the traditional Sanskrit doxographies. But some works contain chapters entitled *Ishvaravada*, whose approximate translation would be “doctrine of God.” The term used for religion is *pantha* (the path), while the Dharma is one the *panthas*. That is to say, there are many religions to lead us to the divine. If the goal is spiritual perfection, the paths to achieve it may be many. Each may be equally efficacious. This distinction shows that the pluralism and respect for all faiths and creeds is built into Hinduism.

---

<sup>14</sup>*Aspects of our Religion*, pp. 1–2.

The term “Hindu” was first used to connote the follower of a religion in c. 712 AD by Mohammad ibn Quasim in the administrative treaty known as “the Brahmanabad settlement.” As well, Al-Biruni (973—1048), in the Preface of his *India*, uses the term to connote the religious principles and practices of “our religious antagonists.” He goes on to say that these theories and observances may sound “utterly heathenish, and *the followers of the truth*, i.e., the Muslims, find them objectionable.”

It was not until the thirteenth century that the Hindus started using the terms Hindu and Hinduism or Hindu Dharma to describe their own religious principles and practices. Saint Namdeva first used the term in his writings, later included in the *Guru Granth Saheb* of the Sikhs. It says: *Hindu pooje dehura, musulmaan masid; Name soi poojya na dehura na masid* (that is, a Hindu worships in the temple, a Muslim in the mosque; but the real worship is of only those who worship the name alone, without the confines of the temple or the mosque). The same is the case with the Hindus’ use of the term “Muslim.” It is reported by Romila Thapar that “The name ‘Muslim’ does not occur in the records of the early contacts (with the followers of Islam). The term used was either ethnic (*turuska*, referring to the Turks), or geographical (Yavanas, Greeks), or cultural (mlecchas).”

Functionally, Hindu use of the term Hinduism refers to the people who follow a religion other than the religions of foreign origin like Islam and Christianity. This continues to be so. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1952 defines a Hindu as a category including not only all Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs but anyone who is not a Muslim, Christian, a Parsee, or a Jew. The use of the term Hinduism in place of *Sanatana Dharma* has the singular merit of avoiding the implication that it is Brahmanism, which in turn implies that it owes its origin to the Brahmanas. The use of the term Hinduism makes it convenient for the user and hearer to understand that it refers to the Indian’s mode of life, inclusive of religion in the strict sense of the term.

Hindu practice contains no absolute list of descriptive and prescriptive regulations; none of its prescriptions and proscriptions, imperatives and taboos is codified permanently. There are some well documented *sadharana dharmas* (normal duties) for all *varnas* (classes and castes) and *ashramas* (stages of life), but in an emergency or exceptional circumstances all the *sadharana dharmas* can be replaced by *apta dharmas*. For example, there are rigid standards for the sacred and the profane with respect to eating, worshipping, performing daily ablutions, marriages, rules of governance, etc., but in an exceptional situation each can be abandoned in favour of an entirely opposite course of action.

Moreover, there is no single prescribed deity or prescribed text to which one must adhere in order to be called a Hindu. One may worship one god or many gods, one may be a Vaishnavite (follower of Vishnu) or a Shaivite (follower of Shiva), or one may be Shakta (follower of Shakti, the female goddess), or one may not believe in any god or goddess at all, yet he can call himself a Hindu. Without losing his Hindu identity, one may go to a temple to worship once or twice a day, once a week, once a month, once a year or never. Likewise, one is free to believe in the authority of the Vedas and to accept them as the text by which to conduct one’s life or to totally reject them—as did the Charvakas, Buddhists, and Jains—without ceasing to be a Hindu. One may

be a strict vegetarian, a non-vegetarian, or even an Aghori—the follower of a sect who eat not only human flesh but also human excreta—still he remains a Hindu. A traditional or a set idea of Godhead or conventional form of worship has no place in Hinduism. Underlying the acceptance of a plurality of Godheads and methods of worship lies a principle. Though the Truth or God or the Supreme may be one, we can and in fact we do see and apprehend it differently from various perspectives. This attitude removes antagonism and also promotes forbearance and sympathy for all religions.

Hinduism does not cramp the growth of its followers by limiting them to the confines of a text or a practice but allows them the freedom to accept all that is good, regardless of where it is found. In the words of Vivekananda, it allows this freedom to the individual, because it realizes that, in human progress, development, and realization, “no theories ever made men higher. No amount of books can help us to become purer. The only power is in realisation and that lies in ourselves and comes from thinking. Let men think” (CW II, p.336). Mahatma Gandhi summarized these qualities of Hinduism in the following way:

*For more on Vivekananda, see p. 126.*

Hinduism is not an exclusive religion. In it there is room for the worship of all prophets in the world. It is not a missionary religion in the ordinary sense of the term. It has no doubt absorbed many tribes in its fold, but this absorption has been of an evolutionary, imperceptible character. Hinduism tells every one to worship God according to his own faith or Dharma and so it lives at peace with all the religions (*Young India*, 6.10.1921)

Hinduism considers all religions to be equal and different paths (*panthas*) for reaching the same goal; it does not attribute any superiority or exclusivity to its own theories and practices. This is clear from its assertion in the *Bhagavata Purana*: “As different rivers originating in different mountains, running along crooked or straight path, mingle their waters in the ocean, so do the different sects, with their different points of view, their different ways of worship at last all come unto Thee.” The Hindu mindset with respect to different religions is represented by the following stanza from a Vaishanva prayer in the *Vishnu Sahstranam*: “Just as all rain water dropping from the sky ultimately reaches the ocean, so the obeisance made to each god in whatever form reaches Keshava (God—the Supreme) ultimately.” It may be noted that Keshava is just one of the names of gods in the Hindu pantheon. Keshava is neither superior nor inferior to other Gods; it is merely used in a figurative sense, as a metaphor. The idea is that all offerings are made to the One, the Supreme, the formless Brahman.

## 5.4 Conclusion

From the above discussion, it follows that a Hindu is “not someone with a particular set of beliefs or practices, but rather someone who is not in any way a foreigner.”<sup>15</sup> This implies that, with the exception of those who by “origin or self identification” look to some tradition like Christianity and Islam, whose origin lies outside the geographical boundaries of South Asia, everyone is by

<sup>15</sup>Mary Searle-Chatterjee, “Caste, religion and other identities”, *Contextualising Caste*, ed. Mary Searle-Chatterjee and Ursula Sharma (Blackwell Publishers, 1994) p. 161.

default a Hindu. Hinduism treats everyone as equal, welcomes all the noble ideas, examines them on merit and adopts them. One of the prayers in the *Yajurveda* says: “*aa no bhadrani kratavo yantu vishvatah*” (Let noble thoughts come to us from all over the world.) It treats and prays for each and every individual. The invocation to the *Kena Upanishad* states:

*Om saha navantu; saha nau bhunaktu; sahviryam karavavahait.  
Tejasvinavadhitamastu; ma vidvishavahai.*

May Brahman protect us both; may He nourish us both; may we both achieve energy; may we never hate each other.

Hinduism tolerates no hostility towards anyone. It extends its hospitality to everyone; it accommodates everyone. The fact that one can follow its principles and precepts without in any way altering ones own shows us the way to human flourishing.