

The idea of liberation
in hindu philosophy
theology religion
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Liberation is unquestionably a significant subject in any religion. In Hinduism, one of the major world religions, there are four objectives of human being (purusharthas). They are dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth), kama (desire), and moksha (liberation). While the first three are categorized as empirical aims, the last one, that is moksha, is considered as the transcendental aim. It is the supreme aim of humanity.[1]From the traditional Hindu philosophical point of view, liberation is considered as the effort of an individual to get released from karma and the cycle of rebirth. Later, when different philosophical schools (Advaita Vedanta, Vishishtadvaita, Dvaita, Dvaitadvaita, and Shuddhadvaita) have emerged in Hinduism, moksha was understood as attaining heaven, realization of one's self, merging into Brahman and so on.[2]That means, there is no particular idea of its exact nature in Hindu philosophy.

Further, in contemporary Hindu philosophy, some prominent figures have maintained that ultimate liberation is universal in nature. They believed that it is the fundamental teaching of the school of advaita philosophy. According to them the transformation and liberation of the individual is not the ultimate destiny of humanity. Rather, liberation is universal and that is the destiny of humanity. An individual who is liberated while living has to remain in the cycle of rebirth in order to bring others to the knowledge of liberation. When all are saved, the world comes to an end.[3]This particular idea is called sarvamukti and it is explicit in the writings of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, a follower of advaita.

This thesis is a study of Radhakrishnan's philosophy of sarvamukti. It involves three steps. First of all, it explains how and on what basis

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Radhakrishnan has developed that particular idea from advaita perspective. Second, it shows how the idea of liberation has been understood in the advaita philosophy. Third, it moves to a critical examination of Radhakrishnan's idea of sarvamukti in the light of advaita philosophy. Prior to this endeavor, it is important to see the idea of liberation, whether it is individual or universal, from the historical and contemporary perspectives.

1. 1. 1 Historical View of Liberation: Individual or Universal

While the concept of moksha in Hinduism is a varying and complex subject, [4]a historical survey on it is quite difficult because Hinduism has no proper chronology. However, for convenience sake, we shall look at moksha in four periods. They are the Vedic Period (2500 to 600 B. C.), the Epic Period (600 B. C. to A. D 200), the Sutra Period (A. D 200 to A. D 800), and the Scholastic period (A. D 800 to A. D 1700).[5]

1. 1. 1. 1 The ' Vedic' Period

The Vedic period is generally considered as the beginning of Hinduism. Prior to Vedic period, we have no knowledge on the idea of moksha.[6]During this period, there are four Vedas. They are Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, and Atharva Veda. These Vedas are again subdivided into Mantras, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads.[7]According to Vedas, the deities are the supreme masters of the world and human fate.[8]The human soul is considered separable from the body and subject to suffering and enjoyment in another world according to good or bad works.[9]It is believed that the other world is the heaven and that is the destiny of the soul.[10]A person

reaches this destiny by doing sacrifices, rituals and good works. Therefore, their action is the determining factor for their life after death or moksha.[11]

However, the idea of moksha is different in the Upanisads which deny the efficacy of the sacrifice in one's liberation.[12]According to the writers of the Upanisads, liberation is through the supreme knowledge of the ultimate reality, the Brahman.[13]A person who is free from desires will reach Brahman. In other words, liberation is mortal bearing immortal. Therefore, the individual's knowledge of the ultimate reality is the significant aspect of moksha.[14]Further, during this period, the laws of Manu and the Bhagavad Gita have become significant sources of Hindu spirituality.[15]

According to Manu, every living being is a microcosm of the supreme soul called God.[16]The cycle of birth and death, the endless journey of a soul, is the consequence of one's own action.[17]Stating this, Manu writes, " sorrows are the result of one's irreligious actions. Religious actions bear such a fruit enjoyment of which never ends." [18]This means, the fruit of a person is determined by the religious actions which that person performs.

[19]Therefore, moksha is the result of the religious actions of the individual.

The Bhagavad Gita, ' the Song of the Adorable,' comprises the dialogues between Lord Krishna and Arjuna during the battle of kurukshetra. According to Gita, salvation is considered as a caste duty. In Gita 18: 64-66, Lord Krishna says these words to Arjuna,

Nay! but once more

Take My last word, My utmost meaning have!

Precious thou art to Me; right well-beloved!

Listen! tell thee for thy comfort this.

Give Me thy heart! adore Me! serve Me! cling

In faith and love and reverence to Me!

So shalt thou come to Me! I promise true,

For thou art sweet to Me!

And let go those-

Rites and writ duties! Fly to Me alone!

Make Me thy single refuge! will free

Thy soul from all its sins! Be of good cheer![20]

In this passage Lord Krishna is encouraging Arjuna to make him his personal refuge so that he shall free Arjuna from all sins. This means that liberation is achieved primarily through devotion to the personal deity. Therefore, Bhagavad Gita also supports the view that liberation is depending on one's own individual devotion.

1. 1. 1. 2 The Epic Period

During this period, the literary sources are chiefly the epics and the puranas. These consist of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. According to this literature, liberation is attained through idol worship (both human and animal

forms), visiting sacred places and observing several ceremonies.

[21]Mahabharata considers moksha as the highest goal of life. It is attained by “ over coming all limitations, and realizing man’s inherent or true universality, truth, beauty and goodness.”[22]

Further, according to Mahabharata, ‘ dharma,’ ‘ arth,’ and ‘ kama’ are very significant values for liberation.[23]The welfare of the individual and the community depends upon these values. Every individual should strive to follow these values in order to attain liberation.[24]This is quite clear in Yudhishtira’s question to Bhisma about the path to liberation. Responding to Yudhishtira’s question, Bhisma says,

the wise person should free himself from anger through patience, destroy desire through abandonment of thought, protect Prana by concentration on Atman and eradicated hatred through discipline. He should conquer the tongue and the mind by his intellect, the intellect by his knowledge, and knowledge by Atman. He should eschew lust, anger, greed, fear and sleep and then practice concentration. ... One should perform good acts and if he acts without desire for fruits, there is no bondage for him.[25]

This passage from Mahabharata tells us that a person attains liberation through good works, discipline and control over mind and tongue. Therefore, liberation is once again an individual effort.

1. 1. 1. 3 The ‘ Sutra’ Period

In this period, the doctrines of Hinduism were written and presented systematically.[26]There are six Hindu systems that are presented in this

period. They are Nyaya (logical realism); the Vaisesika (realistic pluralism), the Samkhya (evolutionary dualism), the Yoga (disciplined meditation), the Purva Mimamsa (earlier interpretations of Vedas relating to conduct), and Uttara Mimamsa (later investigations of Vedas relating to knowledge) or simply ' Vedanta' (end of the Vedas).[27]

All these six schools speak about the pathfinder to moksha. However, we find more specifically in the Nyaya school that liberation is through knowledge.

[28]On the other hand, the Yoga school which is very popular today provides various meditative methods as means of achieving ultimate perfection.

[29]Liberation, according to the Mimamsa schools, is obtained through dharma of the ritualistic observances prescribed in the Vedas.[30]The aspect of salvation through knowledge and ritualistic observances tells us that an individual can achieve liberation personally.

1. 1. 1. 4 The Scholastic Period

In this period, Sutras are interpreted and commentaries were written in order to explain them. These commentaries are classified under five sub-schools of Vedanta. They are Advaita Vedanta, Vishishtadvaita, Dvaita, Dvaitadvaita, and Shuddhadvaita.[31]Further, these commentaries belonging to the sub-schools of Vedanta are later interpreted and commentaries were written on them. These commentaries are limitless and perhaps confusing than enlightening.[32]Among these commentators, Sankaràcharya (8th century C. E), Ramanuja (10th century C. E) and Madhwacharya (12th century C. E) are significant.[33]

Sankaràcharya is the main proponent of the Advaita Vedanta. He claimed that every human being has a self or an entity which is related to the Ultimate reality, Brahman.[34]This human self or atman is independent of the physical body.[35]For him, it is a big mistake to identify atman with the body or the mind.[36]A person who identifies atman with body is under ignorance and this ignorance is the cause of rebirth and death.[37]Liberation from this ignorance is through realization of Oneness.[38]The central point in Sankaràcharya's teaching of Advaita is that the " ultimate and absolute truth is the self, which is one, though appearing as many in different individuals." [39]

Madhwacharya is the proponent of Dvaita philosophy. For him, the soul of a person becomes similar to God in some respect when it is liberated. However, the soul is inferior to God and does not enjoy the full bliss of God. [40]After the soul is redeemed, it lives in the same place with God and near to God. It has the eternal form of God and partially shares the bliss of God. [41]Further, Madhwacharya believes that there are certain souls like demons, ghosts and some men who are eternally doomed and damned and will never have liberation.[42]This implies that salvation is individualistic and all will never have salvation.

Finally, liberation from a historical point of view is personal rather than universal. In fact, there is no indication that an individual's liberation is depending on other's liberation or an individual cannot achieve ultimate liberation till all are liberated.

1. 1. 2 Contemporary View of Liberation: Individual or Universal

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In the contemporary Hindu philosophy there are prominent figures who have taken their stance in different philosophical schools and approached the idea of liberation from their own philosophical frameworks. However, the idea of liberation from the perspective of Advaita Vedanta was significantly favored by many contemporary philosophers. The following is a brief description of the idea of liberation as understood by those prominent philosophers.

Balgangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), a scholar, teacher, political leader, and a proponent of Advaita philosophy, affirmed along with Sankaràcharya that the Ultimate Reality, that is Brahman, is non-dual. The nature of Brahman is Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. He holds that the world of plurality is in fact an appearance of Brahman which is caused by maya. The individual soul is not other than Brahman. His metaphysical teachings are clearly found in his Gita-Rahasya (Secret of Gita).[43]

Ramana Maharshi is another significant Advaitin. In fact, many call him as Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi[44]by considering that he had the self-realization that he is Brahman.[45]For him, liberation is freedom from bondage. It is experiencing the oneness of reality. Self-realization is one of the indications of such liberation.[46]He teaches that after self-realization, a person will be both active and inactive. Active because they are in the world, but they are inactive in action as they act not for themselves but for the sake of others.[47]In this, there is an implicit emphasis on universal liberation in the sense that a person can realize the truth in this world by solely acting for others.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is also a proponent of Advaita philosophy. Regarding this, Gier says, “[I]t is common to interpret Gandhi in terms of Vedantist philosophy, especially the dominant school of Advaita Vedanta. Gandhi’s several references to a qualitatively absolute and two equivocal affirmations of the principle of Advaita offer some support for this view.”[48]Further, Gier says that Gandhi has viewed the sin of others as his own because in non-dualism, there is no distinction between him and others. [49]

Affirming his belief in advaita, Gandhi says, “ I believe in the Advaita, I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter, of all that lives.”[50]Elsewhere, He says, “ I believe in the absolute one-ness of God and therefore also of humanity. What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source.”[51]In this passage, Gandhi’s thought on oneness of humanity, perhaps, imply universal dimension of liberation. However, Gandhi is inconsistent in his view of self. For example, his understanding of self ranges from a strict individualism which Vedantist philosophy does not support. In other words, as Roy points out, Gandhi preserves the “ primacy of the individual.”

Sri Aurobindo, an advaitic philosopher,[52]maintained liberation as a life of knowledge through integral yoga.[53]These yoga paths which are mentioned in the Bhagavad-Gita lead a person to have a synthesis of mind, heart, and will in the self. Such person is liberated and becomes Brahman. He sees all as becoming of that being, and all actions as the action of the cosmic nature.

[54]Aurobindo highlights that Brahman is not an individual, it is unity. If we <https://assignbuster.com/the-idea-of-liberation-in-hindu-philosophy-theology-religion-essay/>

include all then it becomes Brahman. According to Aurobindo's argument, no one can claim " I am Brahman." Rather, claim " I am a part of the Brahman." Till everybody realizes, one has to wait to become the Brahman.

Swami Satprakashananda is a follower of Advaitic School. In his writings he argues that every human has the divine nature. Once the seeker is fully convinced of his inner nature as Brahman, then that is liberation. He emphasized on mind as central for a person to realize the truth. This is possible through meditation on the Self.[55]He primarily discloses ancient Advaitic thoughts of individual liberation. This is clear in his emphasis on an individual convincing of his own inner nature.

Sri Ramakrishna is one of the significant initiators of modern renaissance of Hinduism. He is an illiterate temple priest. But, he endured in experimenting all religions and forms of worship, especially, the Tantra, Vaisnava, and Vedanta methods of spiritual discipline. He also practiced Islamic and Christian forms of spirituality. Finally, he affirmed the ' unity of Religions and Fellowship of Faiths.'[56]

When asked: " When shall I be free?" he replied: " When the ' I ' shall cease to be."[57]For him sarvamukti, the liberation and illumination of all, is inevitable. However, it is a complicated task because it requires special equipment, knowledge and spiritual weapons to illuminate others and strive for the liberation of all.[58]

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) was the chief disciple of Ramakrishna and the founder of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission. He is considered a key figure in the introduction of Hindu philosophies of Vedanta <https://assignbuster.com/the-idea-of-liberation-in-hindu-philosophy-theology-religion-essay/>

and Yoga to the “ Western” World, mainly in America and Europe and is also credited with raising interfaith awareness, bringing Hinduism to the status of a major world religion during the end of the 19th century C. E.

Vivekananda is considered to be a major force in the revival of Hinduism in modern India. He is, perhaps, best known for his inspiring speech beginning with “ Sisters and Brothers of America,” through which he introduced Hinduism at the Parliament of the World’s Religions at Chicago in 1893.

Vivekananda received the knowledge of Advaita Vedanta (non-dualism) from Ramakrishna, his guru. He believed that individual salvation is sheer selfishness. He advocated that all religions are true and therefore ultimately all will have liberation. Further, he affirmed that service to man is the most effective way to worship God.[59]

Some Advaitins believe in a beautiful concept known as sarvamukti. It is a grand idea illustrating the extreme unselfishness of one who has intuited the truth of all existence. The idea is that no single individual can be perfectly free until all are free. Swami Vivekananda was governed by this idea when he declared “ when I used to roam about all over India practicing spiritual disciplines, I passed day after day in caves absorbed in meditation. Many a time I decided to starve myself to death because I could not attain mukti. Now I have no desire for mukti. I do not care for it as long as a single individual in the universe remains in bondage.” To a young aspirant keen on attaining his own salvation, the Swami exclaimed “ You will go to hell if you seek your own salvation! Seek the salvation of others if you want to reach the highest. Kill out the desire for personal mukti.” This is a powerful

expression of the total self-negation required in the path of Advaita for the one who seeks to realize the true self.[60]

Finally, while the idea of sarvamukti is implicit among contemporary Hindu philosophers like Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo, this particular idea is very much explicit in the philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975). Being an Advaitic philosopher, Radhakrishnan strongly believed that men are not merely called to achieve salvation, but all men have to be saved ultimately even though it might mean countless births and deaths. For example he says,

... is indicated by the theory of the indwelling of God ... the ascent of the soul to God achieved by several individuals during the course of human history may be an earnest of what humanity will one day attain. The kingdom of God, a society of saved souls, is the cosmic destiny. The Kingdom of God, a society of saved souls is the cosmic destiny.[61]

While many of his writings communicate the message of sarvamukti implicitly, He expounds the spirituality of this doctrine and its ramifications explicitly in his popular work *An Idealist View of Life* (1929) and also in a paper entitled " Sarvamukti (Universal Salvation) - A Symposium" in *Proceedings of the Eighth Indian Philosophical Congress*. [62] Radhakrishnan believes that human life sharing diving essence is the dream of cosmic process and justification happens only when this long labor of cosmic process is fulfilled. [63] The world will come to an end when man knows himself to be the immortal spirit. This goal is reached when each saved individual is the center of the universal consciousness and continues to act

without the sense of the ego. That means the individual works in the cosmic process as a center of the divine or universal consciousness embracing and transforming into harmony all individual manifestation.[64]But, if the saved individual escapes literally from the cosmic process, the world would be forever unredeemed.[65]

Radhakrishnan's suggests that " though liberation means the attainment of the universality of the Spirit, the liberated self has to retain its individuality as the center of action as long as the cosmic process lasts. For true liberation implies not only harmony within the self, but also harmony with the environment. And, as long as there are unredeemed elements in the environment, the self is bound to act from its individual center to set right the defect." [66]Therefore, liberation is " the ideal individual and the perfect community arise together." [67]

1. 3 Statement of the Problem

While liberation in traditional Hindu philosophy is primarily personal, it is cosmic for some contemporary Hindu philosophers. Sarvepalli

Radhakrishnan, a prominent contemporary Hindu philosopher, maintains that liberation is ultimately universal and not personal.

1. 3. 1 Elaboration of the Problem

Liberation, the ultimate goal of a human being, is a significant aspect of spirituality in Hinduism. While the ancient Hindu sacred writings and the knowledge passed on by the sages reveal its significance in one's personal life, every individual strives through various means to achieve it.

Traditionally, the fundamental feature of Hindu philosophy has been <https://assignbuster.com/the-idea-of-liberation-in-hindu-philosophy-theology-religion-essay/>

individualistic in its spirituality.[68]Therefore, liberation is considered as personal.

On the contrary, many modern thinkers, especially Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, began to affirm that liberation is universal rather than personal.[69]This is to say that an individual self cannot attain salvation until the entire humanity realizes it.[70]But this cannot happen unless the universe is divine because perfection of the individual self is not possible if the universe is evil. Therefore, it is conceived that the ascents of the individual self and the world go together.[71]

If we consider liberation as cosmic, then we need to think seriously whether there is any possibility of liberation for the Hindus. This is because spirituality among Hindus is highly individualistic. The practice of rituals, fulfilling oaths, visiting pilgrimages and any religious activity among the Hindus involve the personal strife for one's own liberation and not for the universal liberation. Therefore, the proposition of cosmic liberation is a significant issue which needs to be addressed.

1. 4 Significance of the Research

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan is a Hindu philosopher and a nationalist. He has written many books on Hindu philosophy, science and politics. He was the first vice president of India and subsequently the second president of India. A study on his philosophy is significant and is relevant as he is a contemporary philosopher. Many thinkers from all around the world appreciate him for his knowledge on Indian Hindu philosophy. Further, this research is significant because it analyzes Radhakrishnan's understanding of cosmic salvation.

Further, the research aims to see what Christian faith has to say for such an understanding.

1. 4. 1 Objectives of the Research

First, it is to have knowledge of Radhakrishnan's proposition of cosmic salvation. Second, it is to critically analyze Radhakrishnan's idea of cosmic salvation to see various strengths and weaknesses in it. Finally, it is to respond to his idea of cosmic salvation from a Christian point of view and bring some possible relevant suggestions to contemporary Hinduism.

1. 4. 2 Hypothesis

Radhakrishnan believes that coherence within the individual and harmony with the environment are both essentials for liberation.

1. 5 Methodology

The philosophy of Radhakrishnan has received great recognition from all parts of the world. Therefore, a lot of work has been done by many from different perspectives. Several books, articles, dissertations and theses were written. In Introduction to Radhakrishnan: the Man and His Thought (1964) Samartha gave a basic understanding on Radhakrishnan's philosophy.[Share this: Facebook Twitter Reddit LinkedIn WhatsApp