
Spiritual Foundations in Contemporary India: The Role of Religion in Modernity

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Abstract:

The paper explores the interplay between science, religion and morality in the context of modernity and globalization. It argues that while modernization has brought significant changes to customs, language and lifestyle, these shifts have created ethical challenges that can only be addressed through a robust moral framework. The paper highlights the Indian philosophical tradition, which uniquely integrates morality with religious principles, suggesting that religion is not merely a set of rituals but a holistic system shaping moral conduct. Contrasting this with Western approaches that often separate morality from religion, the paper emphasizes the need for ethical guidance in addressing the complexities of modern life. Drawing on Indian religious texts such as the Rigveda, Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads, the paper underscores how religion offers a foundational framework for morality. It further explores the distinction between science and religion, noting that while science focuses on the empirical world, religion addresses metaphysical questions that science cannot. However, the two are not mutually exclusive; science and religion can complement one another, with religion providing moral guidance for scientific inquiry. The discussion extends to notable scientists like Isaac Newton, who saw their work as aligned with religious beliefs and the paper stresses the necessity of harmonizing science with religion to prevent the misuse of technological advancements. It concludes that integrating the ethical imperatives of religion with scientific progress is essential for ensuring both technological and moral development, with Indian religious philosophy offering valuable insights for this integration.

Key Words: Modernization, Globalization, Indian & Western Philosophy, Morality, Religion, Science, Ethics, Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads, Empirical Knowledge, Spirituality, Technological Advancement, Moral Framework and Dharma.

In today's era of globalization, we witness profound changes across various aspects of life, including customs, language, lifestyle and food habits. This phenomenon, known as modernization, is reshaping societies worldwide. With these changes come numerous challenges, many of which can only be effectively addressed through a strong ethical framework. Consequently, the importance of ethics in contemporary society is more pronounced than ever.

Modernity introduces complexities that require moral guidance to navigate effectively. In this context, the relevance of ethics becomes particularly significant. While both Indian and Western philosophers have explored the concept of morality, Indian philosophers have traditionally approached this subject by intertwining it with religion.

Indian philosophy has long posited that morality is deeply connected to religious principles. This perspective is rooted in the belief that religion provides a foundational framework for ethical conduct. In Indian thought, religion is not merely a set of rituals but a comprehensive system that shapes moral values and ethical standards. It establishes a holistic view of life, integrating individual conduct with broader societal norms.

For Indian philosophers, morality cannot be fully understood or practiced in isolation from religion. Religious doctrines and practices offer a context in which moral values are articulated and lived. This integration of morality with religion provides a robust framework for addressing the ethical challenges posed by modernization.

In contrast, while Western philosophers have also examined morality, their approaches often emphasize secular or rational foundations rather than religious ones. This difference highlights the unique way in which Indian thought contextualizes ethics within a religious framework, offering a distinct perspective on how to address the moral issues of the modern world.

As globalization continues to influence various facets of life, the Indian perspective on morality and religion provides valuable insights into how ethical principles can guide human behavior amidst rapid societal changes. This approach underscores the enduring relevance of integrating moral and religious values in addressing contemporary challenges.

The central question at hand is whether morality can be inherently linked to religion and if so, whether this connection aligns with the standards of science. To address this, we can turn to Indian culture and philosophy for insight into how morality, religion and science interrelate within this context.

In Indian thought, religion serves as a mechanism for establishing harmony. It bridges various dichotomies such as the internal and external, the individual and society and the material and spiritual realms. The Vedic texts, including the Rigveda, describe religion as the foundational system of the world. Initially, religion in the Rigveda is depicted as a fundamental element or the very basis of existence. As philosophical thought evolved, the Upanishads began linking religion to concepts of truth and duty, reflecting a more nuanced understanding of its role.

In the Bhagavad Gita, a seminal text in Hindu philosophy, religion is intertwined with morality. The Gita presents religion as a guiding force that shapes moral values and ethical behaviour, suggesting that one's duty (dharma) and moral actions are deeply connected to religious principles. Similarly, texts such as the Arthashastra and Manusmriti address the relationship between religion and ethics, where religion is seen as a source of moral guidance and societal norms.

Buddhist philosophy, while distinct in its approach, also acknowledges the role of religion in promoting modesty and ethical behaviour. Buddhism emphasizes the cultivation of moral virtues and the role of religious practice in achieving personal and communal harmony. The emphasis on morality within this framework is justified by the belief that it can address the challenges posed by modernization. In contemporary contexts, the question arises: why should religion be considered alongside morality?

Religion, in this view, is more than a set of external practices; it represents a mood or inner perspective that influences all aspects of human life. Individuals shape their customs, traditions, rules, principles, values and ideals from this personal and communal outlook. Morality, therefore, becomes a social system that regulates and directs human conduct with the aim of maximizing the welfare of both individuals and society.

In modern times, the role of law in regulating human conduct is often highlighted. However, law typically addresses only the external aspects of behaviour and lacks the capacity to influence internal states such as emotions and sensations. Religion and morality, on the other hand, encompass both internal and external dimensions, offering a more holistic approach to guiding human behaviour.¹

¹Shiv B. Singh, *Critical Study of Religious Philosophy* (Allahabad: Sharda Pustak Bhawan, 2014), 288.

Thus, while law plays a crucial role in maintaining social order, religion and morality provide a deeper, more comprehensive framework for personal and societal well-being. In this integrated approach, religion and morality complement each other in regulating and shaping human conduct, addressing both external actions and internal attitudes.

In Indian tradition, the boundary between religion and morality has been blurred to such an extent that they are considered one and the same, primarily because the guiding principles of morality are viewed as equally valid for religion. Both are built on the same foundational precepts, such as the power of God, the freedom of will and the immortality of the soul, which are also central to ethical considerations. Both religion and morality rest on the pursuit of supreme values that direct human conduct toward the highest good. Thus, in Indian philosophy, an individual's religiosity is measured by their moral character, embodying virtues such as patience, forgiveness, strength, steadfastness, purity and control over senses, intelligence, knowledge, truth and restraint of anger.²

A natural question arises: are religion and morality identical? The answer is nuanced. While Indian thought holds that morality and religion complement each other, they are not completely synonymous. Religion is broader than morality. It encompasses morality but morality in itself does not necessarily include religion. The ultimate goal of religion is the realization of Satyam (truth), Shivam (goodness) and Sundaram (beauty). On the other hand, morality serves as a guiding framework for proper behavior. In fact, religion derives its moral guidelines from the ethical domain, and the essence of religion is inherently moral. Morality acts as the purifier and validator of religion because it provides the basis for evaluating what is righteous or unrighteous in religious practices.³ This view resonates with the words of William Lilly: "The more religious a person or society is, the more moral it will be."⁴ Thus, religion's inextricable connection with morality is central to the Indian worldview.

The next pertinent question is whether religion can be scrutinized through the lens of science. In the modern age, there is an increasing tendency to seek a scientific basis for all phenomena and worldviews, including religion. Before addressing this question, it is essential to clarify what we mean by science. Broadly, science refers to any systematic body of knowledge. More specifically, it encompasses fields of

²धृतिक्षमादमोअस्तेयशौचइन्द्रियनिग्रहः

धीविद्यासत्यंअक्रोधःदशकमधर्मलक्षणम्,

³Singh, Critical Study, 289.

⁴ William Lillie, And Introduction to Ethics (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2021),

study that rely on empirical methods, including observation, experimentation, and verification, to arrive at conclusions. Science, in its purest form, is impartial, devoid of subjective biases, personal goals or beliefs and is driven by objective inquiry into the workings of the natural world.

Religion, however, operates in a realm that extends beyond the empirical, dealing with metaphysical realities, ethical imperatives and existential questions that may not always be measurable by scientific methods. The relationship between science and religion continues to be a subject of philosophical debate, particularly in contexts where spiritual experiences or ethical principles transcend material evidence. Nonetheless, the dialogue between religion and science remains an essential pursuit in the search for truth, bridging the gap between empirical knowledge and the broader existential questions that religion seeks to answer.

The question arises whether religion can be evaluated by the same criteria as science, especially in an era dominated by the quest for empirical validation and scientific rationality. Modernity has conditioned individuals to seek a scientific basis for nearly every phenomenon, including those rooted in spirituality and faith.

To address this, it is essential to first define what we mean by science. In its broadest sense, science is any systematic body of knowledge. More specifically, the term refers to fields of inquiry that rely on empirical methods, grounded in experimentation, observation and verification. In science, personal biases, subjective goals or individual purposes have no place. It seeks objectivity, relying on evidence and reason to uncover the workings of the material world.

At first glance, this scientific approach seems fundamentally at odds with religion. Religion posits a world filled with purpose, value and meaning, where the ultimate goal is not merely understanding the material universe but attaining spiritual salvation. In contrast, science, by its very nature, is mechanical, focusing solely on the observable and external aspects of life. While religion emphasizes the inner life, the soul and higher metaphysical principles, science restricts itself to the external, physical reality. Religion, aiming for salvation, seeks answers to existential questions, whereas science pursues truth through the study of natural laws and phenomena. For example, religion speaks of God as the means of achieving salvation, while science concerns itself with natural facts and the laws governing the universe, often rejecting or remaining indifferent to spiritual beliefs, moral values or ideals.

This distinction extends to the way both disciplines approach verification. The truths of science can be demonstrated, tested and replicated. Scientific theories, hypotheses, and laws are open to scrutiny and can

be revised based on new evidence. In contrast, religious beliefs are not subject to the same empirical scrutiny. Spiritual experiences, the existence of the divine, or the moral imperatives religion advocates are often beyond the reach of the scientific method and cannot be conclusively verified or falsified.

Given these apparent differences, a question arises: does this imply that religion lacks scientific validity? Or does science have no place for religion at all? The answer to this question requires a deeper reflection on the nature of both disciplines. While they operate within different domains—science within the empirical, religion within the metaphysical—it does not necessarily mean they are in complete opposition. Both seek truth, though they approach it from different perspectives. Religion, through faith, intuition, and revelation, addresses questions that science may never be able to answer, such as the purpose of life, the nature of morality, and the existence of a higher power. On the other hand, science offers explanations for the material world and the processes that govern it, illuminating the workings of nature in ways that have practical and tangible effects on human life.

Moreover, the two can complement each other. Religion can provide a moral and ethical framework that guides scientific inquiry, ensuring that the pursuit of knowledge remains aligned with human values and welfare. Similarly, science can offer insights that deepen one's appreciation for the complexity and beauty of the universe, which, in religious terms, could be seen as an expression of divine creation. Therefore, while science and religion differ in their methods and aims, they need not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Rather, they address different aspects of human existence and understanding, with the potential for a meaningful dialogue between them.

The view that science and religion have their own limitations is indeed a thoughtful one, and if both remain confined to their respective realms, conflict can be avoided. Science deals primarily with external, observable facts, focusing on the material world and its phenomena. It does not and arguably cannot, make any judgments about internal, evaluative experiences, particularly those concerning human and spiritual values. These realms—of ethics, morality and spirituality—fall squarely within the domain of religion. Similarly, the empirical facts unearthed by scientific inquiry do not necessarily overlap with religious doctrines. Religion is not concerned with particular material facts; instead, its focus lies on real values, meanings, and the essence of human experience in its entirety.⁵ This clear distinction in the fields of science and religion indicates that the two operate on different planes.⁶

⁵Singh, Critical Study, 341.

⁶ Singh, Critical Study, 341.

However, concluding that there is no harmony between science and religion would be premature and misleading. While their methods and areas of focus differ, it is possible to establish a meaningful coordination between the two. One might ask: why is such coordination necessary?

The necessity for coordination arises because science, when divorced from the moral and ethical guidance of religion, can indeed become not a boon but a curse for humanity. The devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is a stark reminder of how scientific advancements, when unchecked by moral considerations, can lead to horrific consequences. Similarly, the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine serves as a contemporary example of how technological advancements in warfare, devoid of a moral compass, can result in immense suffering and destruction. Had the powers responsible for such catastrophes considered the moral and ethical teachings of religion—especially those related to the sanctity of life, peace, and compassion, perhaps these tragic events could have been averted.

Albert Einstein, one of the greatest scientific minds, eloquently stated: “Religion determines our destination, but science presents the evidence that helps us achieve our goal or reach our destination.”⁷ This statement highlights the complementary nature of science and religion. While religion provides humanity with a moral and spiritual compass, guiding us toward higher goals, science offers the tools and knowledge to navigate the material world and fulfil our aspirations. Therefore, both serve critical, yet distinct roles in human life.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the ultimate aim of both religion and science is, in essence, the same: to serve humanity and to search for truth. Religion, through its focus on spirituality and moral values, seeks to elevate human life beyond mere material existence. It asks profound questions about the meaning of life, the nature of good and evil, and the existence of a higher power. Science, in its pursuit of understanding the universe, also seeks truth, though it does so through experimentation, observation and empirical evidence.⁸

Religion, in many traditions, teaches us to have faith in an extra-human power, often referred to as God. Science, on the other hand, may not define this power as God, but even within the scientific community, there is a recognition of the vast unknown forces that govern the universe. In fact, science occasionally

⁷ Einstein, Albert. Science and religion; approach to the philosophy of religion, edited by Bronstein and Schulweis, 69.

⁸ Singh, Critical Study, 342.

encounters realms where it brushes against the philosophical and spiritual. In the study of quantum physics, for example, concepts such as uncertainty, consciousness and interconnectedness have led some scientists to consider the possibility of a deeper metaphysical reality—one that is not easily explained by traditional scientific paradigms. In these moments, science itself becomes, in a way, “religious,” acknowledging the significance of spirituality, even if it does not embrace the concept of a personal deity.

There are times when science, despite its empirical roots, recognizes the importance of spirituality as a guiding value for humanity. The search for meaning, ethics, and a sense of interconnectedness—hallmarks of religious teachings—can provide the moral framework that directs scientific discovery toward serving the common good. Thus, rather than viewing science and religion as adversaries, they can be seen as partners in the grand pursuit of knowledge, truth, and human well-being. When science is guided by the ethical imperatives of religion, and when religion is informed by the empirical insights of science, the two can work in tandem to enhance and elevate the human experience, ensuring that progress in one domain does not come at the expense of values in the other.

One may indeed question whether any prominent scientist has successfully bridged the gap between science and religion. The answer lies in the legacies of figures like Isaac Newton and Pierre-Simon Laplace, who, despite their ground-breaking scientific achievements, acknowledged the profound role of religion in understanding the universe. Newton, one of the greatest minds in physics and mathematics, considered himself a devout believer, a “religious scientist.” He famously remarked, “The stars revolve around the Sun. If God does not protect the stars from wandering, then either they will be destroyed by falling into the Sun or will start rotating irregularly.”⁹ Here, Newton highlights a deeper belief in a divine force that governs and sustains cosmic order. To him, scientific inquiry did not replace God; rather, it revealed the grandeur of God’s creation, underscoring the harmony between science and divine providence.

Laplace, while often seen as a proponent of scientific determinism, was still influenced by the vastness of the universe, which he believed science alone could not entirely explain. While he famously told Napoleon that he had “no need of that hypothesis” when referring to God in his scientific model, this statement does not negate the influence that questions of morality and meaning had on his work. Scientists like Newton and Laplace understood that science is not about the exclusion of religion, but about the complementary pursuit of knowledge.

⁹Singh, Critical Study, 342.



This relationship between science and religion becomes all the more critical when we reflect on the consequences of technological progress devoid of moral grounding. If science and modernity are not harmonized with the moral values embedded in religion, then no matter how advanced our technological achievements become, they will fail to solve humanity's fundamental problems. Technology, for all its power, cannot eradicate the inner turmoil and ethical crises that continue to plague the human condition.

Despite the unprecedented advancements of the modern era, human suffering persists—indeed, it has multiplied. This can be seen in the devastation wrought by two world wars, the horrors of concentration camps, the looming threat of nuclear conflict, and the prolonged Cold War. These events are clear reminders that while human scientific knowledge has progressed rapidly, our collective moral wisdom has not kept pace. Technology has given us unprecedented power but it has not equipped us with the ethical frameworks necessary to wield that power responsibly.

Even today, the Russia-Ukraine war, coupled with political instability in Africa and mounting tensions among other world powers, serves as evidence that humanity's intellectual achievements have far outstripped its moral development. In fact, these conflicts underscore the imbalance between our immense technological capabilities and our failure to cultivate the wisdom necessary to use them for the greater good. This imbalance threatens to spiral out of control unless science is reined in by the moral and ethical values that religion provides.

To avoid this, science must be integrated with religion, and religion, in turn, must offer the moral guidance necessary to temper the dangers of unchecked technological advancement. A moral framework rooted in compassion, respect for life, and a commitment to the welfare of humanity is essential to ensure that scientific discoveries are harnessed for the benefit, rather than the destruction, of mankind. The rich moral tradition found in Indian scriptures offers a profound source of guidance in this regard. In India, religion has never been confined to ritual or dogma; it has always encompassed morality as an integral aspect of spiritual practice. The very essence of Indian religious thought emphasizes the unity of moral conduct with spiritual enlightenment.

The teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, for instance, remind us that true knowledge is incomplete without the pursuit of wisdom, which is inextricably tied to ethical action. Similarly, the Upanishads stress the importance of internal purity and moral righteousness, both of which are essential for attaining higher knowledge. These texts offer a vision of religion that not only inspires reverence for the divine but also instills a deep commitment to ethical living. This moral compass is what is needed in the modern world to guide the use of scientific knowledge toward the upliftment of humanity.

Albert Einstein's warning, that "the unleashed power of the atom has changed everything except our way of thinking," points to the same conclusion. Without a shift in ethical and moral consciousness, scientific and technological power will continue to be misused, leading to ever more destructive outcomes. Indian religious philosophy, with its emphasis on Dharma (righteous duty) and Ahimsa (non-violence), offers a potent remedy to this problem. It teaches that true progress is not just material but also moral and spiritual.

Thus, the need for harmonizing science with religion is not merely theoretical but practical. If the immense power of science is not tempered by moral responsibility, it will continue to pose a threat to human civilization. By integrating the moral teachings of religion with the rational, empirical insights of science, we can ensure that human progress is not just technological but ethical and spiritual as well.

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