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Universal Religion: What Does it Mean?

The concept of universal religion has been much in vogue in recent times.\(^1\) In fact it has been used so often and in such diverse contexts that one begins to wonder whether it means the same thing all the time, or different things at different times. What follows is an attempt to determine its various usages and the intellectual roots of these usages.

One can approach the question from several points of view. These may be classified, for convenience, at the very outset, as (1) the philosophical approach; (2) the History of Religions approach; (3) the denominational approach; (4) the denominational approach; (5) the missiological approach; and (6) the dialogical approach. The meaning of these descriptions should become clear as the discussion progresses.

**THE PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH**

The philosophical approach to the question of universal religion naturally turns on the nature of the universal – a matter of considerable philosophical debate.\(^2\) At least three positions can be distinguished on the issue, particularly on the relation of the universal to the particulars: (1) nominalism; (2) conceptualism; and (3) realism. According to the nominalist position, the ‘existence of a general word does not imply the existence of a general thing named by it’. Thus the fact that religion as a general word is used for particular religions does not mean that a universal or general entity like religion exists. On this view there would not only be no universal religion, but no ‘religion’, apart from the particular religions. Conceptualism holds that we do have concepts or general ideas which are both abstract as well as abstracted; abstracted, that is, as the common element from the particulars of a given class. On this view one could legitimately, if not concretely, talk about both religion as a general word and universal religion as that general property which each individual religion

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possesses, by virtue of which the same general word is applied to them. According to the realist position, the universals definitely exist, an issue with which the conceptualist is not particularly concerned. They could, however, exist either as separate entities (the Platonic version) or ‘not separately from particulars but in them’ (the Aristotelian version). On this view, then, one could postulate a universal religion existing apart from the particular religions, which would then be mere imperfect reflections of it by Platonic extrapolation; or alternatively, by an Aristotelian extrapolation, one could speak of a universal element existing in all the particular religions.

It is a point worth noting that all of these three positions on universals—the nominalistic, the conceptualistic and the realistic—have parallels in ancient Indian thought and that views regarding the nature of universal religion also seem to correspond to the philosophical standpoints outlined above. Thus, for instance, Santayana’s comparison of ‘any attempt to speak without speaking any particular language’ with ‘the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular’, seems to imply a nominalistic position on the question of universal religion; attempts to frame definitions of religion are often conceptualistic in nature, while some religious figures like Mahatma Gandhi seem to take a realistic view of the universal religion more in the manner of Plato (‘extreme realism’) and others like Rammohun Roy more in the manner of Aristotle (‘moderate realism’). It may also be added that the relationship between the ‘particular’ and ‘universal’ could also be viewed integrally, rather than primarily from the point of view of the universal.

THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS APPROACH

Just as the key concept to be considered when the matter is approached philosophically is the universal, the key concept involved when the History of Religions approach is adopted is that of the archetype. The transition from the previous section to this may be accomplished by moving from the Augustinian idea that the Platonic forms were archetypes in the mind of God, to the Jungian idea that the archetypes exist in the mind (collective unconscious) of human beings rather than in the mind of God. If an archetype is described as ‘a primordial image, character or pattern that recurs through the religious experience of mankind consistently enough to be considered a