

Call for Papers

Academic Conference on “Religious Studies and Inter-religious Understanding: Prospects and Challenges” 16 & 17 December 2022

Rationale for the Conference

‘Religious studies’ is a knowledge-perspective which is still in the early stage of its development in India and even Asia. The very genre of ‘religious studies’, embodying a reflective and critical approach to religion, in line with the disciplinary pursuits of knowledge, has not yet sufficiently informed the Indian / Asian mind. A concept like ‘religion’ presents enormous complexity while being related to Indian reality.

This is, however, not to deny the rigorous pursuits of philosophical enquiries and reflections upon traditions that have been present in this subcontinent from time immemorial. Scholars like K. C. Bhattacharya, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Surendranath Dasgupta, Eric Frauwallner, Karl H. Potter and others, through their voluminous writings, have brought to our awareness the emergence from ancient times of deep metaphysical reflections found in various orthodox or heterodox traditions, philosophical ‘systems’ and ‘devotion’-based ‘religious’ traditions of this land.¹ These instances of deep reflections point not merely to the ‘axiological reflexivity’² obtained by humanity in this region of the globe but also to the emergence of human reasoning, expressed in argumentations, disputations and differentiations, as part of a relentless search for ‘truth’, considered to be the ultimate reality. These forms of reasoning eventually flowed down to the making of the typical *Argumentative Indian* as in the words of Amartya Sen.³

While a stream of such traditions continued to flow through the Indian sacred landscape, they did not yet constitute critical perspectives, characteristic of religious studies. A remote beginning of the latter, however, began with the scholars of comparative religion and not less so with the ethnographers of the British colonial dispensation. Max Muller⁴ in an earlier period and Mircea Eliade⁵ in a later period produced voluminous material on ‘religions’ of the East, and propelled multifaceted intellectual enquiries in the subcontinent, if not in the whole of Asia. Scholars, known as the Orientalists, through their strenuous efforts at collection, classifications and printing the available texts, brought up the philosophical heritage of India to the public gaze and contributed significantly to inform the Indian mind of ancient traditions.

¹ Cf. Karl H. Potter ed. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Philosophies* I-IX Volumes (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977); Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy* (2 volumes). London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1923; Eric Frauwallner, *History of Indian Philosophy* I-II Volumes (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973).

² Axiological reflexivity, as per Karl Jaspers, is a reflective consciousness emergent around the sixth B.C., due to which several meta-reflective traditions were born around the globe.

³ Cf. Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian – Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

⁴ Cf. Friedrich Max Muller, *On the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religions of India* (London: Longmans, Greens and Co, 1878).

⁵ Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958).

Though this initial stage of ‘comparative religion’ did bring about insights, discussions, debates, and argumentations, they did not yet give birth to an academic study or disciplinary pursuit on religious studies. As Vasudha Narayanan observes, even the educational policy makers of the colonial times, such as Lord Macaulay, did not consider making religion a subject of academic studies,⁶ while other modern subjects like language, literature, law, mathematics, etc were introduced. This apparently was a beginning of the absence of religious studies which continued for a long time until some higher educational institutions during the post-colonial era introduced them under Departments of Philosophies, Civilization Studies, Literature, and in some Universities under the name of Departments of Religious Studies.⁷ But they are very far and few, in a country which has about 900 Universities! Moreover, the kinds of studies that are pursued in these academic institutions do not lend themselves to be classified uniformly under the genre of religious studies. In not a few institutions, what goes on under religious studies is ‘religious instructions’, along with memorising religious texts and traditions. However, this is not to deny the serious academic attempts being made in some quarters to study religion or traditions with rigorous methods.

What is very important to note is that besides these limited academic circles we find a host of voluntary, individual or institution centred, research initiatives to study religion and philosophy in India. First of all, we have native Indian Professorial scholars like T. N. Madan, T. M. B. Mahadevan, Daya Krishna, J.N. Mohanty and others who have studied or study religion / philosophy and publish widely. While some of them do in the style of systematic expositions, others do it more interpretatively. Secondly, there is a host of scholars of Indian origin but placed abroad in Universities or research Institutions, like Arvind Sharma, Vasudha Dalmia, Vasudha Narayanan, Ashuthosh Varshney, and others who study Indian religion and philosophy with high levels of specialisations. Most of their studies are textual in focus. Thirdly, we have a good number of scholars of Indian origin, placed either abroad or in India, who study the interfaces between religion, philosophy, politics, society, and so on. Ashis Nandy, Partha Chatterjee, and Rajiv Bhargava are some good examples. Fourthly, we have a host of foreign scholars, collectives and institutions who pursue studies upon Indian religions and philosophies. A good section among them follow textual studies, branching off into studies which fall within religious studies or philosophy frameworks, and, studies which combine sociological, cultural, and psychological perspectives; yet another good section does field-based empirical researches.

The profile of religious studies emerging from the foregoing account brings up certain important concerns as regards the status and role of religious studies in the Indian context today. The first and foremost of the concerns is to address the question of the academic status of religious studies in India. Can India, one of the most populous countries in the world, having about 900 Universities, bring religious studies in its mainline educational curriculum? Can religion be taught and studied at the higher educational institutions so as to cultivate the young minds with the wisdom of different religions and to enable younger generation to approach different religions in an informed and enlightened manner? Can the academic study of religion contribute to inter-religious understanding and religious tolerance? What are the challenges and prospects facing such a project?

⁶ Cf. Vasudha Narayanan, “The History of the Academic Study of Religion in Universities, Centres, and Institutes in India.” *Numen*, vol. 62, No. 1, Special Issue – *De-Orienting Religious Studies: Four Genealogies of the Study of Religion in Modern Asia*, 2015, pp. 7-39.

⁷ The University of Madras, for example, has five religious studies departments and one department for Indian philosophy: Departments of Religious Studies for Vaishnavism, Saivism, Jaina Studies, Islamic Studies and Christian Studies, along with a Department for Indian Philosophy.

With the above questions in mind, the conference proposes to bring together scholars of religious studies as well as philosophers of religion from different universities of India and call for papers to reflect about the prospects and challenges of doing religious studies in India. The conference will also look into the possibility of creating a forum for scholars to continue to undertake religious studies and promote the education on different religions in the academic field of higher education in India.

The Conference welcomes paper proposals of topics that include but not limited to the following :

- Academic Study of Religions and Inter-religious Understanding
- Academic Study of Religions in Higher Educational Institutes: Prospects and Challenges
- Academic Study of Religions and Religious Tolerance
- Academic Study of Religions and Indian Secularism
- Academic Study of Religions and Indian Constitutional Provisions
- Religions and Philosophies: Convergences and Divergences in the Indian / Asian Context
- Indian or Asian Understanding of 'Religion'
- Indian or Asian philosophies of Religion
- Academic Study of Religions in Classrooms
- Religions, Philosophies and Public Sphere
- Religions, Philosophies and Public Life
- Possibility of a Curriculum for Religious Studies
- Comparing Curricula with Religious Studies in Other Countries
- Democracy and Religion
- Religion, Formal and Informal Education
- Religions and Civil Society
- Public Religion and Study of Religions in Public Educational Institutions
- Public Religion and Civil Religion in Indian / Asian Contexts
- Public Religious Education and Ethical Conversational Spheres
- Etc.

A brief paper proposal not exceeding 300 words needs to reach interreligious2022@gmail.com or before **17th October 2022**. Results on the selection of paper proposals will be made known by **25th October 2022**. Selected paper presenters need to send in their final **paper by 30th November 2022**. Papers with clarity of thought, cogency of ideas and critical reflections will be considered for publication in an edited volume post-conference.

Registration for the Conference

The participants of the conference are required to register through the following link on or before the 5th Dec.2022 :

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1QeeqXmmZVF1KvPER1cWE-JKqFxcB8SHtPxdtujmxhaU/edit>

Registration fee details :

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| Faculty from IIT & Central Universities | Rs.2000/- |
| Faculty from State & Private Universities and Scholars from IIT | Rs.1000/- |
| Students (Masters, M Phil and Ph D) | Rs. 500/- |

Registration Fee through D D drawn in favour of 'The Registrar, University of Madras' may be sent to The Dept. Of Christian Studies, Main Building, II Floor, University of Madras, Chepauk, Chennai 600 005 or submitted in advance at the venue.

Convenor

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