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# Religious pluralism and social harmony

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## Introduction

Productive inter-cultural dialogue between China and India could become one of the most positive features of contemporary Asia. In January 2005, the US National Intelligence Council predicted that by 2020 there will be a tripartite contest for world supremacy between the three economic giants—USA, China and India. Professor Meghnad Desai of the London School of Economics, also predicted that by 2050, India and China would be able to produce one-half of the total wealth of the world (*The Hindu*, 2004: 12). It is hopefully an auspicious sign for the future that relations between India and China have far more often than not been characterized by inter-cultural dialogue and co-operation, especially in the religious sphere, than any 'clash of civilizations'.

As a European with an interest in Asian cultures and history, it has sometimes surprised me that these two great civilizations, so close to each other geographically, have had relatively little interaction. On the one hand, an excellent aspect has been that for more than two thousand years of neighbourly living, there has been hardly any warfare between them. It is true there were short-lived border clashes in the early 1960s, but they can be considered mere pin-pricks compared to the great massacres that have taken place in Europe, the Middle East, and many other parts of the world. On the other hand, China and India have not readily turned to each other for trade, technology exchange, political and cultural ideas, diplomatic support. Given their shared interests, as I said, it is rather surprising. From ancient times, India and China have led the world in many areas of science and technology, and they were probably the richest two countries in the world up to about the sixteenth century. Then, both suffered hugely under colonial rule; both struggled for independence from the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and gained it in the 1940s; both admired socialism and Soviet Russia in the 1950s; both have experienced rapid social change and economic growth in the past two decades; both have very important diasporas all over the world. Yet their main international connections seem to be elsewhere: China has hundreds of years relationships with Korea, Vietnam and Japan, and in this century with Russia, America and Europe. One of India's main regions of influence was Southeast Asia, and from 1750 to 1950 it experienced British rule, and subsequently mass migration to the UK and several UK colonies in Africa and the Caribbean.

Yet at a more subtle level, there have been profound cultural interactions. For two thousand years or more, China has welcomed Indian religious and secular knowledge in Buddhist philosophy, temple life, pilgrimage and also in material medica, geography and other areas. India was influenced by Chinese technologies. Mutual trade and diplomacy flourished in medieval times. India has been a conduit of world cultures, a thoroughfare between the Western and Eastern hemispheres, for many millennia. In the past decades, there has been a strongly renewed interest in religiosity in China. This has been expressed partly in the revival and spread of Christianity, and partly in the currently impressive resurgence of Buddhism. In recent years the practice of yoga (easily assimilated into Chinese culture) has spread extremely rapidly in Chinese cities, leading to numerous publications in different media. Chinese scholars are also taking an interest in the Hindu philosophical resources for religious pluralism.

This paper addresses what can be a complex problem for political and religious leaders to handle, namely that in any society, but especially in a large country, there will inevitably be many different belief systems and also different religious institutions. This variety could under some circumstances lead to confusion, competition and even violent conflict. Is there any way, on the contrary, to make sure that this variety is a source of strength and mutual enrichment? I believe this is possible, and that we should be able to gain some useful ideas from Indian traditions; ideas, moreover, which easily resonate positively within Chinese culture.

## **Models of religious pluralism**

Before moving to philosophical issues, I would like to clarify some background ideas about religions in society, and more specifically, religions in India and China. I believe improved understanding of religious issues, and consequently social or civilizational harmony, will cover at least the following topics for which I provide a synopsis: state policies towards religions; religious policies towards states; and inter-religious relationships. I will present them in a simple, diagrammatic form:

### Diagram 1: State policies towards religions

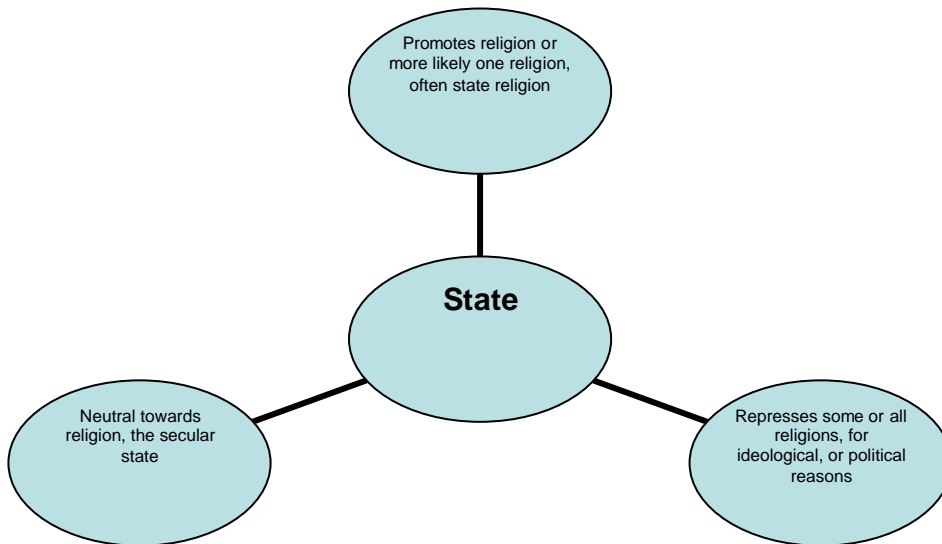


Diagram 2: Religious attitudes towards state power

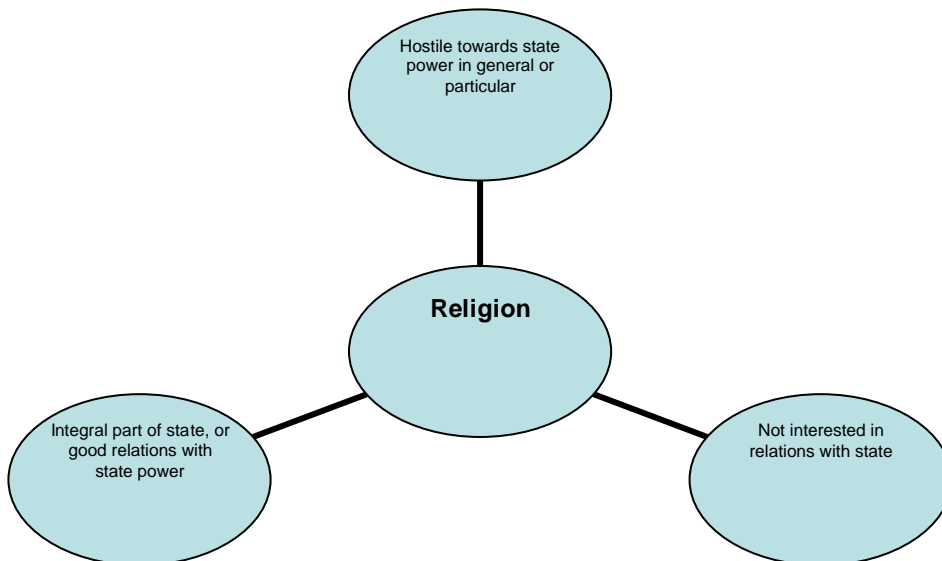
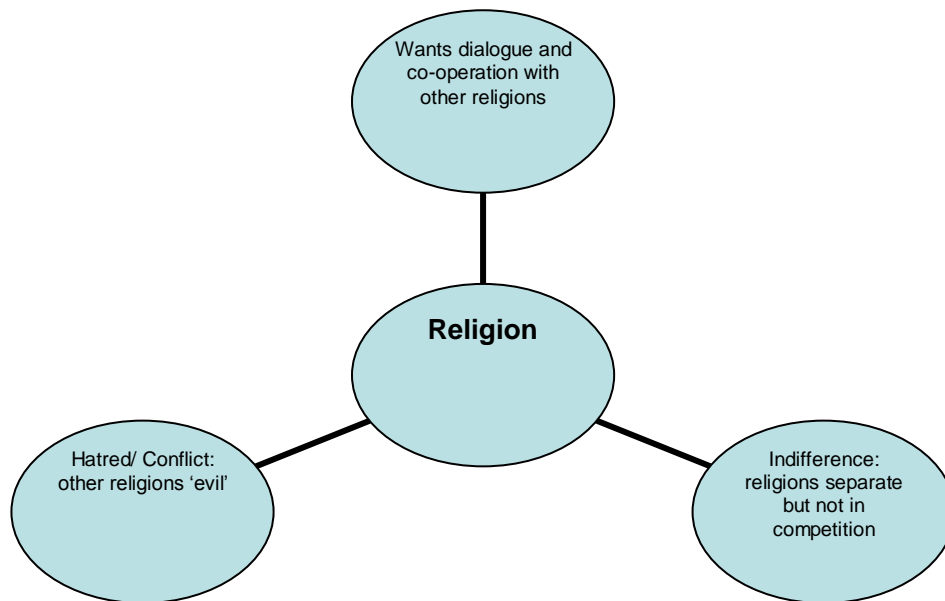


Diagram 3: Inter-religious relationships



Even with these simple models, one can see the many combinations that might take place, and in fact it is easy to recognise real-life issues that sometimes have a dramatic effect on the contemporary world. To take a positive example, the South African government during the apartheid era adopted a policy of promoting just one or two 'official' churches, namely those white Protestant churches like the Dutch Reformed Church that supported the apartheid regime. All other religions were oppressed to a greater or lesser extent; for example there were regular TV shows where Hinduism and Buddhism were denounced by Christian pastors as 'devil-worship'. Even other Christian churches were oppressed, usually because they supported the liberation movements. However, it was a characteristic of the South African freedom movement, especially after the release of Nelson Mandela and subsequent negotiations with the regime, that all religions in South Africa played a peaceful and supportive role. There were numerous conferences and mass-meetings where Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and others stated their joint commitment to a democratic and representative new form of government; and they were often instrumental in pressurizing political leaders to make necessary compromises for good outcomes. On the whole, excellent relations between religions in South Africa continue till now.

Much more negative uses are too obvious to detail here: one can think of the Japanese use of Shinto as a military doctrine; the Roman Catholic Church's support for Hitler and Mussolini; Islamic terrorism.

From the above discussion, I think it would be reasonable to make a tentative conclusion: society will be best served when a state is generally neutral towards all religions in its territory; where religions respect and co-operate with state authorities; and where religions attempt to understand and learn from each other. Of course, all systems and all individuals fall short of perfection but at least we need a model to work towards to achieve a harmonious society.

## Indian and Chinese concepts of religion

Indian civilisation 'has projected a totality of heterodox past and pluralist present', to quote the Indian Nobel laureate, Professor Amartya Sen. He argues that Chinese civilisation is more integrated, and structurally cohesive than its Indian counterpart: the Chinese state has shown a persistent endeavour towards homogeneity, orthodoxy and past-present mediation. Not surprisingly, concepts of religion and religion in society are rather different in the two sub-continent; but perhaps surprisingly, there are also many similarities. I will sketch out some of these features in this section.

To start with the differences, everyone who has studied, or even visited, India and China is aware of profoundly distinctive cultural patterns. A major scholarly effort to articulate the patterns was made in an earlier generation by the Japanese scholar Hajime Nakamura, conceptualized in Hawaii and Japan (Nakamura 1964). Nakamura argues that overall Indian religious culture is patterned by, among other qualities: a stress on universals and abstract thought; a preference for negative terminologies; an introspective and otherworldly, metaphysical orientation; and a spirit of tolerance and conciliation. By contrast, he characterises Chinese cultural values as more: oriented towards concrete, particular, lived experiences; esteem for tradition and hierarchy; human- rather than God-centred; but also with a spirit of tolerance and harmony. We might disagree about particular aspects of this analysis, but it does seem a reasonable conclusion, and a welcome one, that the values of tolerance, conciliation and harmony are core values in both cultures.

Perhaps surprisingly, I would argue, there are many features in common between Chinese and Indian religiosity: perhaps even more than their many apparent differences.

Table 1: Religious features of China and India

Unique to India	Shared	Unique to China
	Folk religion, popular beliefs	
Hinduism	Buddhism	Confucianism
Sikhism	Islam	Philosophical Daoism
Jainism	Christianity	
<b>[Traditional]</b> Religious support for mini-states	<b>[Traditional]</b> Religious support for state	State supervision of religion
	<b>[Modern]</b> Secular state	
	Morality transmitted through religion	

On the level of state-religion relations, both societies in traditional times were dominated by elite classes who combined political and religious power. As is well known, in the case of China this was frequently under one, more-or-less united imperial system (integrated and structurally cohesive as Professor Sen puts it), underpinned by the Confucian world-view and imperial rituals. In the case of China, the ruling elite was more fragmented, usually into mini-states or kingdoms which again were often under the control of Muslim or later British rulers. But these kingdoms, and the population in general, were also tied to, and supported by the

Brahmin class of ritual specialists. As well as ritual support, there was, and still is, a repository of social knowledge in the form of proverbs, mythology, codes of behaviour in both countries, much of which has religious origin.

The similarities are even more profound than that. In both India and China, there is a vast stream of 'popular religion', which is sometimes described negatively as 'superstition'; and sometimes evaluated more positively as a source of folk wisdom, cultural heritage, and community celebration. To my knowledge, international scholarship has barely begun to investigate the parallels and distinctions there may be between the respective birth and death rituals, geomancy, astrology, community festivals, popular religious art, rural customs and other aspects of folk religiosity.

Surely most influential, though, and still in my opinion not fully acknowledged, are the profound similarities between Hinduism and Buddhism in general; and Chinese Buddhism in particular, a topic I have dealt with at length elsewhere (Hunter 2000). It is of course widely known that Buddhism arose within the Hindu context, indeed Sakyamuni Buddha himself was most likely born and brought up as a Hindu, and his life-story conforms in essence to that of many Indian sages. So the underlying doctrines of Buddhism – karma and rebirth; non-violence and compassion; liberation through meditation and mental purity – are almost identical to those of its original cultural environment. The two most prominent differences, incidentally, are usually thought to be the Buddhist rejection of caste and priesthood; and the replacement of the traditional Indian gods and goddesses by images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

My main point here is that central, over-riding concerns permeating both Chinese and Indian religious culture are all conducive to excellent relations between religions, between religion and society, and between religion and state. Indeed in many ways I feel these relations can be more smooth than in many countries further to the West, where there are strong traditions of religious intolerance and exclusivity.

### **Hindu resources for religious pluralism**

In the past fifty or even one hundred years, Chinese scholars and officials have examined religious and state traditions in a variety of countries as they have formulated, revised, and updated religious thinking in China itself. For example the Guomindang government knew about religious policies in Japan and the USA; the early Communist Party government adopted some ideas and legislation from Soviet Russia; Chinese scholars examined European models during the Deng reform era; and most recently there are major Chinese research initiatives to appreciate religious legislation in numerous countries including India. Whether or not Indian ideas have anything concrete to add to Chinese policy debates, I am not sure. But it is true that India has been resolutely pluralist (heterodox past and pluralist present as Sen puts it) for as long as anyone knows.

I will briefly consider the 'public' aspects of this, namely pluralism in state and society. The sub-continent of India has been, and still is, home to numerous beliefs, major world religions like Buddhism and Christianity, sects of all kinds, the native Hinduism, and countless folk traditions. It has been rather exceptional that any Indian state apparatus has tried to supervise, let alone control these diffuse activities. The exceptional periods have only been those when particularly fanatical Muslim rulers gained power in Delhi and tried to eradicate all non-Muslim practices, sometimes by mass slaughter. Fortunately, such incidents were relatively rare and most Muslim rulers, like the British, while they were personally may have felt rather superior to

local practices, rarely tried to exterminate them by force. On the contrary, by far the mainstream of Indian political tradition has been on the one hand to co-opt the Brahmin class and religious professionals in general into the service of the state; on the other hand to let the populace carry on as it wished in the religious arena. And it is often seen as one of the major successes of post-independence India (and largely due to the personal efforts of Gandhi himself) that the Indian state has been resolutely secular for the past fifty years: not suppressing any religion per se, but neither supporting any favours for the majority Hindus. This neutrality is evidenced in many ways, for example at the most senior national level by having Muslim Presidents or Sikh Prime Ministers as a matter of course.

Traditional Indian society also strongly valued qualities like tolerance and non-violence. The word *Titiksha* means tolerance or forbearance, and is a quality praised in the main Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita* (2.14), along with similar virtues like *akrodah* (freedom from anger, 16.2) and *ksantih* (tolerance, 13.8). The meaning is that whatever occurs, one should not feel anger, resentment, or mental disturbance. Even if someone attacks or insults us without cause, there is no need to feel enmity. How does one come to this state? One approach is a deep acceptance of the law of returning karma: an 'enemy' is in fact only the instrument of a process which we ourselves initiated, and for which we are responsible. If I had not created a problem for myself because of some past action, I would not now be experiencing a difficulty. To a devout believer in this theory, taking revenge on an 'enemy' means to shoot the messenger and ignore the message. Moreover, those who accept the law of karma and reincarnation may be relatively willing to let go of longing for retribution: they feel that the perpetrator will inevitably receive a comeback for their deeds, so it is almost irrelevant to go out of one's way to try to inflict some kind of punishment or revenge.

More generally, tolerance of discomfort can be interpreted as an important element of spiritual discipline, not necessarily taken to the point of extreme austerity, but at least willingness to suffer hardship, as exemplified by Gandhi in British prisons. A more profound interpretation within non-dualistic schools of Hindu philosophy is the realization that the Self of all human beings – indeed all living beings – is essentially one and the same, and one with God also. So there is no 'Other' against whom one could feel anger.

*Ahimsa* is in the West perhaps the most discussed of all Indian religious terms, in great part because of Gandhi's influence. The Finnish scholar Tähtinen devoted a book to its meaning in Indian texts (Tähtinen 1976); while Gier's more recent publication elucidates the concept in the context of Indian, Greek and Chinese philosophy (Gier 2004). *Ahimsa* is widely used in the Buddhist and Jain traditions; and within Hinduism it is an ancient term used since the Vedic period. *Ahimsa*, usually translated as 'non-violence', carries a complex set of meanings. This much is obvious from even a superficial reading of the *Bhagavad Gita*, because *ahimsa* is enjoined several times as a cardinal virtue, while at the same time its protagonist Arjuna is exhorted to fight and kill his enemies. One way out of this paradox, put forward by Gandhi among others, is to argue that the battles of the *Gita* are supposed to be psychological battles only, and that Arjuna, representing our conscious mind, is being exhorted to fight his lower nature or sinful desires. This interpretation, however, seems very forced and does not accord with the overall Hindu position that violence under certain circumstances is justified and necessary.

The following exegesis was given to me by Hindu interviewees. *Ahimsa* has a two-fold meaning: 1. one should not harbor feelings of anger or enmity even if obliged to fight; 2. one should not do anything that will cause unnecessary harm, confusion or misery. One should recognize that there are many circumstances where a citizen will need to resort to physical force, for example, to protect the weak against aggression,



or to prevent a serious crime. One's first duty is to resist evil, by force if no other means is available. Thus, for example, if one is a law-abiding citizen of a well-governed country which is suddenly attacked, one should take up arms if required to do so. (Personally I find this one of the weaker components of the argument, since all Caesars build up their armies by appealing to self-defense priorities; they never seem to build up techniques of peaceful non-co-operation or other ways to break the cycle of violence.) The key point of *ahimsa* is that even while fighting, one should not feel anger or hostility towards the attackers, but maintain a state of mental equilibrium. And one should realize that it is sometimes better for people to die or to be imprisoned, rather than for them to continue committing crimes. Forcibly restraining a violent psychopath would be quite in accord with the doctrine of *ahimsa*: it is good for the restrainer, and will also help the psychopath because it averts further bad karma. Incidentally *ahimsa* is the antonym of *himsa* which means uncontrolled, random, angry violence. *Ahimsa* could then possibly be translated as 'non-violent force' if such a concept is thinkable.

Non-violence and tolerance, then, are central topics in Indian culture, and I believe they are most useful ones when discussing religious affairs and the formation of a harmonious society. I believe it would be a useful exercise to compare them with some traditional Chinese virtues like *heping*, *hejie* and *wenhe* (Hu 2006).

## **Neo-Vedanta and religious pluralism**

I will conclude this paper with an analysis of a specific philosophical conception of religious pluralism which was put forward about one hundred years ago by the Indian sage Swami Vivekananda. The concept was in itself a remarkable intellectual achievement, formulating in modern [English] language a number of profound insights from the Sanskrit tradition. Vivekananda himself is so well known in India and even in the West that he barely needs introduction: he was in many ways the founder of 'modern' Hinduism, the first major Indian missionary to the West, a spokesperson for colonial Asia, an educator and social reformer, and a prolific writer and speaker, whose 9 volumes of Collected Works are still widely read as evidenced by contemporary debates (Killingley 1998; Radice 1998; Beckerlegge 2000). A selection of his works with commentary is now also available in Chinese (Vivekananda 2006). Vivekananda's modern formulation of traditional Indian philosophy is now generally called Vedanta (or more academically 'neo-vedanta' to designate its modernity incarnation), and it was further developed by several important Indian thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century including Gandhi, Radhakrishnan and Tagore.

The vision of Vedanta is completely different from the exclusive world-view of dogmatic or fundamentalist religion. The philosophical underpinning is perhaps most easily approached through the concept of Brahman or Ultimate Truth or the Supreme Reality, something like Dao or Taiji in Chinese tradition). The main underlying principle of philosophical Hinduism can be expressed as: authentic religion is the personal realisation of Truth. Following Vivekananda, the illustrious statesman and philosopher Radhakrishnan formulated this traditional Hindu belief as 'Religion is not a creed or codex, but the intuition of reality, the direct experience of Supreme, the achievement of the state of Illumination' (Radhakrishnan 1967) pp.102-103. It is significant that intuitions of Reality (or Truth or Dao) are not exclusive to traditional theistic religions with a personal interpretation of God. On the contrary, there is a

long tradition in India, as in China, for an atheist spirituality which, indeed, many see as a core aspect of Buddhism.

Having said that, Vivekananda and most contemporary Hindu thinkers see no need whatsoever to be antagonistic to any religious belief, practice, or sect. On the contrary, it is inevitable that human beings grow up and live in a shared culture, so they will have different traditions of prayer, literature, music, meditation and so on. Again as Radhakrishnan put it: If a Hindu chants the Vedas on the banks of the Ganges, if the Chinese meditates upon Analects, if the Japanese worship the image of Buddha, if the European is convinced of Christ's mediatorship, if the Arab reads the Koran in the mosque and if the African bows down to a fetish, each one of them has exactly the same reason for his particular confession. Each form of faith appeals in precisely the same way to the inner certitude and the devotion of its followers. It is their deepest apprehension of God and God's fullest revelation to them. (Radhakrishnan 1969), pp. 326-7.

In other words, one cannot blame a person for not having chosen his parents; likewise one should not blame him or her for not having chosen a particular religion. On the contrary, we should respect all people's parents, and everybody's cultural or religious heritage. Even if no religion can claim to be absolute and decisive, every religion, according to Hindu tradition, is worthwhile and efficacious. Sri Ramakrishna, the teacher of Vivekananda himself, tirelessly argued that all religions are safe paths which lead men to the unique source of eternal happiness, the Divine, and so everyone must faithfully follow his way and respect the same freedom of the others.

The famous Gandhi was particularly eloquent when defending the variety of religions. He writes: After long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion that a) All religions are true; b) All religions have some errors in them; c) All religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism. All religions are true, explains Gandhi, because they contribute efficaciously to the spiritual progress of humanity. But since men, their heirs and interpreters are imperfect, they are stained by some imperfections. If we are open and welcoming enough, we will be able to purify them of these faults. So Gandhi's advice is that we must not only appreciate, but also integrate in our own faith, the best elements of other religions. (Gandhi) vol. VI, p. 269.

Dr. Radhakrishnan points out that the spirit of tolerance, (dialogue is its current development), must not spring from a vague feeling of sympathy or compassion for the faults of others, but from the belief that Truth always transcends human understanding; that God contains in Himself more than man knows. For that reason he affirms: Tolerance is the homage which the finite mind pays to the inexhaustibility of the Infinite. (Radhakrishnan 1969) p. 317.

In this perspective, the fruit of every religious dialogue, according to Gandhi, must be: "want the Christians to be good Christians, the Moslems to be good Moslems, the Sikhs to be good Sikhs and the Hindus to be good Hindus under all circumstances. That to me is real conversion". (Gandhi 1971) p. 199.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have surveyed various aspects of religious pluralism and tolerance in India and China, and argued that there are quite adequate social and political traditions inherent in both cultures that could lead to a harmonious relationship between religions and between religions and state. Moreover, incidentally, there is

also every reason to suppose that religious and cultural dialogue between Indian and Chinese religious figures should also be productive and co-operative.

Specifically I would like to highlight the contribution made towards a model for inter-religious tolerance and pluralism by the stream of thought known as neo-vedanta, a form of religious relativism which yet recognises the intrinsic value of individual religions. I would summarise it as follows:

- The pursuit of Absolute Truth is a legitimate, meaningful human activity. No religion or philosophy has a monopoly on Truth.
- On the other hand, nobody should be pressurized to participate in any religious belief or inquiry: it is entirely an individual choice.
- Different religions and cultures use different terminologies to describe Truth, and humans have created a variety of religious institutions, books, leaders etc.
- We should respect and enjoy this variety of approaches, celebrate the different manifestations of human creativity, and learn from each other.
- We can recognise and appreciate shared moral values among all religious traditions, especially tolerance and non-violence.
- On the other hand, it is proper to oppose to un-ethical conversion and interference; and to oppose to violence and criminality in the name of religion.

This concept is quite in accord with Indian tradition and with contemporary Indian thought. And as far as I understand, it should be quite acceptable also within the context of Chinese tradition, and also with contemporary Chinese government views on the subject. I conclude with a famous statement that, in effect, summarises all that has been thought on this subject. The first is from what is probably the oldest scripture in the world, The Rig Veda (I.164.46) which states "Ekam satam vipra bahuda vadanti" or "to what is one, the sages give many names"

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