We now turn to an issue in the philosophy of religion, viz., the question of idol-worship, to be analysed here with reference to the relationship between such elements of religion as the creed, the code and the cult. It is argued in the present chapter that Hinduism exhibits a certain flexibility in the relationship of these elements such that its understanding, for instance, of the cult aspect in general, and of idol-worship in particular, is significantly different from that obtained in the Semitic religions where this relationship is not understood in this flexibility.

(a) Creed, Code and Cult: Their Interrelationship

It will be useful to recall here for a moment what was said in chapter II, section (b)(ii), about the relationship between Experience or direct intuitive knowledge, Thought or theory, and Life or conduct as elements in a more or less complete justification of a particular understanding of the ultimate goal of human life. It was pointed out in that context that any one of these elements functions only as
a part of a complex totality which embraces all these elements in their interrelationship. Further it was noted that while the aspect of Experience and Thought differ considerably from philosophy to philosophy, the Life-aspect is more or less the same in all of them.

This implied something about the very nature of the relationship between these elements, viz., its flexibility. This relationship could be described as flexible inasmuch as the different intuitive experiences and the theoretical systems go, consistently and in an organic relationship, with the same kind of life which is the life of the liberated or one modelled on it.

It may now be said, in the same vein, that there is an organic relationship between the elements of religion which are often identified as the creed, the code and the cult, that this relationship may also be conceived as flexible. It is suggested in this chapter that the Indian understanding takes into account this relationship in all its flexibility.

In fact, one might pinpoint this understanding of the flexible relationship of the elements of religion as the single most important characteristic of Hinduism. According to this understanding, the creed, the code and the cult are to be taken together; and, while the code is more or less the same for different religions and for the different sects
in a religion, there is considerable difference in their creed and cult aspects. Differences in the code aspect are also possible and to its implications we shall return later.

How is it possible to have such a close parallel between the domains of philosophy and religion? The creed aspect of religion, though it is often distinguished from the metaphysical doctrines of philosophical systems, can nonetheless be understood as sharing some of the fundamental properties ascribed earlier to metaphysical theories in their relationship with direct knowledge and life itself; and the code aspect of religion, though it is not identical with the life aspect mentioned earlier, comes very close to it.

And, the cult aspect provides the link between the creed and the code. What is cult but a reminder to oneself that this is the kind of life one has to lead, and a declaration or promise to others that it shall be led so? So that for instance, one may ask another: You are a believer in God and you go to church, but then how do you do this? The belief and conduct aspects get interlinked by the religious person's 'practising' his religion, that is, by cult.

Now, if the metaphysical theories or the thought aspect of a particular philosophy does not stand or fall by
itself but has to be viewed in its relationship to the aspect of Experience and Life, then, in the same way, the doctrinal aspect of religion is to be viewed not in isolation from its other aspects but in their interrelationship. This interrelationship demands that a religion be not approached in and through any one of its parts, that an understanding of the whole complex should help us understand and evaluate the nature and validity of the parts of the whole.

The approach to religions which is being rejected here as unsatisfactory is indeed the modern approach and it is a very popular one at that. Two examples may be cited here.

J.Krishnamurthy raises the question 'What is religion?' and answers it thus: "When the mind is swept clean of image, of ritual, of belief, of symbol, of all words, mantras and repetitions, and of all fear, then what you see will be the real timeless, the everlasting, which may be called God ... It is only when the mind is in revolt against the so called religion that one finds the real." ¹

The understanding of religion implied here has little to do with belief, rituals, etc. This becomes clear when it is noted that this statement about sweeping the mind clean of image, ritual etc., is preceded by an enquiry wherein he asks such questions as: Are ceremonies religion? Is
worship of a symbol or of an image religion? Is belief religion? And the answer to each question is in the negative. Whatever the appeal of this 'revolutionary' analysis, the piecemeal approach adopted here cannot be conducive to the true understanding of religion.

Similar is the case with Ambedkar's analysis of Hinduism wherein he shows that each of the elements of Hinduism, doctrines, rituals, practices, each involves difficulties, and therefore this is no religion at all.

In fact, Ambedkar's riddles also provide a clue to the proper understanding of Hinduism. For instance, there is the riddle that all Christians have some common beliefs, so have the Muslims; but there is no common body of doctrines for all those who call themselves Hindus. Though Ambedkar raised this issue in order to show the unreality of the concept of Hinduism, it is possible to say that this problem only indicates that the Hindus' own understanding of Hinduism is not in terms of any one or the other of these elements, that this understanding is in terms of the totality of them in their flexible interrelationship, so much so that no particular doctrine or ritual may be a necessary element and yet some doctrines, some rituals, and a code of conduct, harmonized in a particular way, would qualify as a form of Hindu-
dharma; that is, if it does not go against the basic framework of this religion. In short, it is this framework, rather than the elements which go into this framework, that may be said to be the central feature of Hinduism.

(b) The Issue of Idol-worship

The above analysis suggests that one is not to take a particular creed, or a particular form of worship, or a particular practice, and examine it in isolation. For, these elements are intimately and organically related among themselves. On the contrary, if one takes either the creed or the code or the cult in isolation from the other two, then, to say the least, the meaning and significance of these get considerably altered. This can have important and often devastating consequences for the understanding of religions, one's own as well as of others'.

This was probably what happened to the idea and practice of idol-worship in Hinduism which was the subject of a fierce controversy in the past. It is common knowledge that the Christian missionaries, for instance, assailed Hinduism on account of this practice. It may be noted, however, that some of the Hindus themselves began to think on the same lines and wish that Hinduism had not got so embroiled in the worship of so many idols.

The Ramakrishna Mission, that pioneer Hindu institution,
is today led, by a number of circumstances, to saying that it is not part of Hinduism. This has been the Mission’s stand in the course of a legal battle to ensure its right to run its educational institutions unaffected by certain state regulations prejudicial to it. In the same way, confused and compelled by the pressures and challenges of the day, even Hindu stalwarts like Dayananda Saraswati and Raja Rammohun Roy were led to think that idol-worship is a blot on Hinduism.

It took a Gandhi to assert that basically there is nothing wrong with this practice. It is therefore with reference to Gandhi’s understanding of this issue that we analyse the nature of Hinduism vis a vis the Semitic religions which do not have, despite of their eastern origins, a flexible understanding of the relationship between the creed, the code and the cult, and which therefore have tended to view idol-worship in a different manner altogether.

Not only Gandhi defended the practice of idol-worship, in his definition of Hinduism he included this aspect, albeit in a negative way: as a Hindu he does not, he says, disbelieve in idol-worship.  

But, before we proceed with the discussion of Gandhi’s defence of idol-worship as a proper and legitimate practice,
let us take note of one or two possible objections to the line of thinking adopted here.

In the first place, could one really say that a distorted understanding of the elements of a religion is necessarily a consequence of isolating them from the totality? Could one not rather say that, for one reason or the other, one is inclined to distort the alien beliefs and practices one confronts, and therefore it is just a matter of convenience to take on the different aspects of Hinduism one by one?

The Christian missionaries, for instance, who accused Hinduism of idol-worship and described this practice as idolatry, were not equally critical of the use of symbols in their own religion. This seems to indicate that they knew quite well what the role of symbols in religion is, that they could have, with some effort perhaps, desisted from isolating the cult aspect, and the use of symbols in cult, from the other aspects, and that therefore they could also have desisted from branding Hinduism as idolatrous. It seems, thus, that there was no theoretical compulsion about it.

But this is just one possibility, and it is not such a plausible view either. For one thing, the fact that the Christian missionaries were not adverse to the use of symbols in their own religion does not imply that they understood the
elements of religion in their flexible relationship. And, for another, it is not correct to suppose that it is natural for man to distort alien beliefs and practices.

A more plausible view would therefore be to suppose that the missionaries had this strong tendency to view the elements in isolation from the whole and this naturally led to some distortion. Thus, it is not so much a question of somebody being naturally inclined to distort something or the other; rather it is a question of a particular understanding and the implied perspective which develop into their logical consequences. If it is true that the missionaries' understanding was coloured by their inclination to establish the superiority of Christianity, it is even more logical to view this inclination itself in the background of their basic approach. Thus, it may be said that their piecemeal approach to the new religion they encountered here is mainly responsible for their finding it wanting in many respects when compared with their own.

Hence, it is that in this chapter we analyse an instance of distortion in understanding a religious factor, viz., idolworship, with reference to the isolationist tendency which, while it goes against the grain of Indian Thought, seems to be a characteristic feature of much modern Western Thought. The Hindu emphasis on the flexible relationship
between the various elements of religion implies that, in whatever form an element might appear in a certain context, always it has to be considered along with the other factors which are internally and organically related to it.

Though it runs the risk of giving the impression that none of the elements involved is really important, the Hindu understanding of the flexible relationship of these elements is, it may be argued, adequate to explain the meaning and significance of these elements. Its adequacy in this respect may not be less than that of an understanding where the flexible relationship of these elements is not a central conviction.

Another pertinent question in this context is about the 'arbitrariness' of our choice of the cult aspect of religion in order to illustrate the difference between the two perspectives under consideration. The choice is, indeed, not as arbitrary as it might appear; it has been influenced partly at least by the following considerations:

The choice of the creed aspect for this purpose, though it is the usual practice, would really have been very problematic. We do not set much store by the rational-dogmatic distinction which seems to distort our understanding of both philosophy and religion. By this kind of a contrast
between the two, their relationship is often missed entirely. But the general approval this distinction enjoys makes it imperative that, before we may fruitfully discuss an issue relating to the creed aspect of religion, we first remove the misunderstandings on which this distinction rests. And this would involve further detailed analysis which cannot be undertaken in the present study.

An element of the conduct aspect would have the same kind or problems. If there are close connections between the theoretical/doctrinal aspect of philosophy and the creed aspect of religion, there is a similar relationship between their practical aspects. One would have to make a number of clarifications in preparation for a discussion on an element of the conduct aspect so that the usual way of distinguishing between philosophy and religion does not come in one's way.

True, it is incorrect to locate, on this account, the point of difference between philosophy and religion in the cult aspect which seems to be an element of religion and not of philosophy. Yet, it cannot be objected to if, on account of the lesser ambiguities involved, we select an item of the cult aspect, viz., idolworship, as the issue with reference to which we may discuss the difference between the two perspectives in question.
There is, however, a more positive consideration for our choice of the cult aspect. As already noted, the cult serves as a link between the aspects of creed and code, and therefore this aspect is more easily seen in its relationship with doctrines regarding God, salvation, etc. on the one hand, and on the other, with the rules of conduct prescribed as conducive to the kind of life universally regarded as religious.

Thus, though it involves a departure from the usual practice of dealing with religion in terms of belief in God, soul, etc., it is here thought fit to concentrate on an item of the aspect of cult which is obviously and intimately connected with the aspects of creed and code; and, with reference to this, we discuss the kind of relationship of elements that we want to underscore as essential to the Indian approach to the issue of man's salvation.

With these preliminary remarks about idol-worship and its relationship with the doctrinal and practical aspects of Hinduism, we may now take up for consideration Gandhi's defence of this practice. The purpose of the following discussion would be to bring out the principle on which this defence is based, rather than to establish the correctness or validity of the defence itself.
(c) Gandhi's Defence of Idol-worship

It is a matter of significance that Gandhi's views on idol-worship are based on a certain understanding of religion in general and of Hinduism in particular. It is argued here that this understanding takes into account the whole, and the relationship of the elements of this whole, while considering any one of the parts of religion. It is, thus, an understanding which is illustrative of what may be called the Indian perspective.

Gandhi's understanding of idol-worship may itself be viewed in contrast to the understanding of Dayananda Saraswati and Rammohun Roy. This helps to bring out the strength of this understanding.

Both Dayananda and Rammohun took pains to refute the missionaries' charge that Hinduism is idolatrous. But, for this purpose, both denied a place for idol-worship in Hinduism. Rammohun, while agreeing that this is an aberration, argued that this and such practices are there in Christianity too. He tried to distinguish the pure spirit of the dictates of Hinduism from its popular manifestations. And he held that such superstitious practices as idolatry which deform Hinduism have nothing to do with the spirit or essence of it.

Dayananda Saraswati, agreeing that idol-worship is
an undesirable and unjustifiable practice, tried to show how Hinduism in the pure and original form was devoid of this practice. He attempted to establish the monotheistic interpretation of the Vedas. It was on this basis, he thought, he could in principle root out the evil of idolatry: once the God of the Hindu is understood and accepted as the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, etc., true worship cannot be had except by stūti (glorification), pārthana (prayer), and upāsanā (communion); never can it be by an idol.

Gandhi did not, of course, think that an idol was necessary for every one, without exception, to approach the Infinite. At the same time, he did not consider the person who used an idol as inferior to the one who did not need it. It was, therefore, not merely a question of using an idol or not using it. Rather, the wider context of life has to be taken into account before judging the right and wrong of idol-worship. Hence he made a distinction between idol-worshipper and idolator, the latter being one who makes a fetish of an idol.

An even more important distinction that Gandhi made is between the so-called idolatry and the real variety of it: the real idolator is, according to him, the one who thinks that only his own form of worship is the true form!

The force and clarity of this perception may be
traced to Gandhi's understanding of religion as involving a flexible relationship among its various elements. According to this understanding, the life of the liberated which is conceived as the ideal life, may exist in an organic relationship with different doctrines, different rituals and even different codes of conduct. There is, then, no need to suppose that true religious life can go only with any one or the other of these different sets of doctrines, rituals and codes. Indeed, according to this understanding, it is by and through these differences that persons with different temperaments and backgrounds can develop themselves and progress towards the ideal of religious life.

It is this understanding which enabled Gandhi to appreciate the use of symbols in religion which is what idol-worship actually amounts to. Gandhi, thus, held that tree-worship symbolizes true reverence for the vegetable kingdom. It is true that the poor, simple-minded people who offer worship to trees, have no reasoned understanding of their practice. At the same time, if the principle behind this practice has been clear to some minds in a community, as expressed in their poetry or their philosophy, then it should be a sufficient reason to justify this principle and through that this practice.6

Similarly, for Gandhi, cow-worship symbolizes reverence for the animal kingdom. It is also important here to
note that for Gandhi a mosque, a church, even a word uttered in prayer, can be as much an idol as anything else.

Gandhi did not, however, support all kinds of worship. He was opposed to animal sacrifice as he was opposed to a temple to oneself. That is, the choice of the forms of worship implied by a flexible understanding of the elements of religion, is not without its limits; and, yet, the limit is set by reason and good sense, not so much by the particular doctrines of a religion.

Gandhi, seems to represent the Indian understanding more closely than, say, Dayananda Saraswaty or Rammohun Roy. Neither Dayananda nor Rammohun thought Hinduism to be in any way inferior to the other religions of the world. And yet it was Gandhi and not those who could really stand up to the challenge of the Christian missionaries. This is because Gandhi regarded as a strength a peculiar feature of Hinduism, the flexibility in the relationship between its various aspects or elements such as code, creed and cult. Neither Dayananda nor Rammohun seems to have taken this flexibility seriously.

It may be noted here that, as a result both Dayananda and Rammohun only reacted to the challenge of the missionaries; they did not properly respond to it, notwithstanding the fact
they are some of the great sons of this great religion. Either they argued that the Christian religion also has these practices, or they tried to project an image of Hinduism devoid of such practices. In both cases they argued mainly with reference to the elements of religion, while Gandhi argued with reference to the totality of the elements in their interrelationship.

To conclude, Gandhi's approach is best understood as based on the principle that an element cannot be judged or evaluated in isolation from the complex totality constituted of a number of organically related elements.

(d) The Significance of the Gandhian Approach

As has already been pointed out, here it is not intended to argue that Gandhi's understanding of religion is correct and unassailable. And, though it has been found possible to regard Gandhi as truly representing the characteristic Indian approach, it is not necessary here to argue this either. What is, indeed, of relevance here is to bring out more fully the significance of the Gandhian approach and its implications for the comparative study of religions.

In this section we shall dwell on the significance of this approach. Its implications for comparative studies will be taken up later where it will be argued that Gandhi's
understanding of religion and religious differences provides a sound and solid basis for a fruitful dialogue of religions.

We have already explained the intimate relationship between (a) Gandhi's response to the charge of idolworship in Hinduism and (b) the notion of flexibility in the relationship between creed, code and cult. To state this relationship differently, one might say that this flexibility leaves many possibilities open, and Gandhi's response to the charge of idolworship in Hinduism is one such possibility. And, in so far as it seems to be alien to the understanding of religion which lacks this flexibility, this possibility is significant for an understanding of Hinduism.

As already noted, this notion of flexibility means taking seriously the possibility of different religions adopting essentially the same form of life as the ideal one, that is, even when they differ considerably with regard to their doctrines and rituals and even the rules of conduct. This notion that the same kind of life which is regarded as the spiritual or religious form of life can go with different doctrines, rituals and codes of conduct, implies a number of things for the methodology and approach to the study of the religious phenomenon.

When, for instance, we examine an element of the creed aspect, we will have to take into account not only
other elements of the creed which together constitute a single body, but also the aspects of code and cult. Further, it is to be noted that this organic relationship of the elements of religion has to be understood with reference to the integration of these elements in the best lives a religion has produced.

It is in the lives of the saints or the realized persons that the elements of creed, code and cult combine in various proportions and in their flexible relationship, always giving rise to a unified whole. These lives, therefore, offer the best clue to the essential character of religions vis-a-vis their individual elements and their interrelationship.

This is not to say that, as the life expected of the followers of different religions is essentially the same, differences between religions in doctrines, rituals, etc are unimportant. On the contrary, the all-important question is how best to understand these differences.

The usual method is to take on these differing doctrines and rituals one by one; which really means looking at them in isolation from the complex totality that religion is. In this approach the evaluation will at best proceed on the basis of some particular understanding of a doctrine and/or a ritual, which is not necessarily a holistic understanding;
and at worst it will be dictated by strong personal prejudices and other unhealthy inclinations, so much so that the understanding becomes wholly untenable. It is not at all likely that this sort of evaluation takes into account the totality of elements in a religion in their true interrelationship.

On the other hand, one might begin by examining the role played by a particular belief or ritual or code of conduct in the life of the followers of the religion concerned, and then proceed to an analysis of the various factors affecting the fulfilment of this function. This approach naturally involves taking into account the interrelationship among beliefs, rituals and rules of conduct, and the role this whole complex plays in promoting a certain kind of life. For, each element plays its role only in so far as the other elements are there to play their respective roles. For instance, belief in a set of doctrines, it is clear, will not by itself make for spiritual progress; nor worship, nor even obedience to the code, will by itself serve this purpose. So much so that the validity or otherwise of these elements may then be decided only by taking into account the interrelationship of these elements.

The situation that obtains here is strikingly analogous to the one regarding the Experience - Thought - Life complex described earlier. In chapter II we found that each
of these is a justification of the ultimate goal only to
the extent that the others complement it. One might press
the analogy further to say that as there was the fourth
dimension of Sabda in that case, here in the case of the
creed-code-cult complex there is 'grace' as an enigmatic fourth
dimension, a factor which is no less intriguing than Sabda
itself.

Our attempt has so far been to see how the under­
standing of a flexible relationship between the elements of
creed, code and cult can bring about a fairly reasonable
understanding of appreciation of any element of religion,
including idol-worship which is an item of the cult aspect.
While the missionaries, and to an extent the Hindu leaders
such as Dayananda and Rammohun, viewed idol-worship in isola­
tion and found it not justifiable in itself, Gandhi viewed it
in relation to the elements of creed and code in Hinduism,
as also in relation to the kind of life that is to be sub­
served by a combination of all these.

If the opposition to idol-worship was on the ground
that it is something less than God, that it is only an image
or an ordinary object, Gandhi's answer was mainly in terms
of the role of symbols in life as a whole and in the life of
the religious man in particular.

Gandhi thus pointed out that the use of symbols is
not restricted to the worship of a deity; it is there in every sphere of life. Also, he described the idols as bridges to the Infinite, in general a necessity for human beings. He thus argued that the objection to idol worship is not legitimate; for, the use of symbols in life as a whole and in worship in particular, is quite natural, perfectly understandable, and completely rational.

Gandhi seems to differ significantly from the other champions of Hinduism who were somewhat apologetic about the practice of idol-worship. Not only he is not apologetic, Gandhi in fact turns aggressive when he redefines idolatry as the exclusivistic approach to forms of worship, thus turning the tables on the accusers. Here we find him fully exploring the possibilities opened up by an understanding of the various elements of religion in their flexible interrelationship.

On the one hand, this understanding enables one to see clearly the role of symbols in religion, whether it be one's own or another's. On the other, it shows how a proper understanding of one's own religion, and of its doctrines, rituals, etc., is bound up with an understanding and appreciation of the same in other religions as well. For, when one understands the parts in their relationship to the whole, this understanding is not likely to be limited by the actual limitations of the parts considered; rather, it will take
into account the role played by the parts or elements under consideration, and this role can then be the same as the role played by a different element in a different context and in a different religion.

The above discussion which based itself mainly on the principle of interrelatedness of the elements of religion, needs to be supplemented with a clarification as to what the flexibility of the relationship of elements does not imply. Thus a flexible relationship does not mean that anything can go with anything else; rather, there has to be some consistency among the elements so interrelated in a religion as to form one unified whole. This actually follows from our notion of religion as an organic whole which is, in a sense, analysable into its various components.

Thus, the general body of beliefs in a religion should not rule out the kind of cults associated with it; rather, it should actually be conducive to this kind of cult. For example, if veneration of cows is one of the forms of worship in a religion like Hinduism, then it must be that the creed of this religion is consistent with this practice, that it also encourages this practice.

The emphasis in Hindu doctrines on the basic unity and interrelatedness of all things and beings may be said to
encourage, for instance, the worship of implements and of animals, the attention on cow in a special way being attributable to a number of contingent yet significant circumstances. It is now possible, from this point of view, to understand Gandhi's statement that cow-worship, in which he saw the principle of man's unity with the animal kingdom, is the contribution of Hinduism to the whole world. It is also possible to view vegetarianism, which has a prominent place in Hinduism, from the point of view discussed here.

The creed and the cult must thus be consistent with each other. At the same time, this does not rule out the flexibility in their relationship. That is, a particular form of worship does not necessarily become obligatory to all in a religion even when it is permitted, encouraged, and emphasised. Thus, for instance, not only vegetarianism and cow-worship, but even the use of idols in worship, does not acquire universality in Hinduism.

It may be useful here to distinguish between absence of a uniform practice due to flouting of religious injunctions by some people, and absence of the same due to the flexibility inherent in the relationship between creed, code and cult. Whether it is the one or the other can be judged fairly easily: there is very likely to be adverse criticism and comment if it is the former, and there will almost be no such criticism in the latter case. Thus there is no necess-
ity for even the orthodox practitioners of Hinduism to
worship the idols. A Ramakrishna may worship the image of
Goddess Kali, and a Gandhi who was prepared to defend idol
worship with his life, may never worship an idol; and both
are equally Hindus!

(e) The Semitic Scene

The above understanding of Hinduism as centered on
a certain view of the relationship of its various constitutive
elements, may be corroborated in a number of ways. It is
thus significant that the various sects of Hinduism do not
disapprove of their followers worshipping in the holy places
of sects other than one's own. Not only this, in fact, the
Hindus can worship in the holy places of Christians and
Muslims and be more or less completely at ease.

The fact that some Hindus keep the image of Christ
is not necessarily explained as resulting from confusion and
ignorance; it is equally, if not better, explained as resul-
ting from the flexibility in the relationship between creed,
code and cult in Hinduism.

Again, it is said to have been the practice, till
very recently, in many Hindu families of Punjab to make their
first son a Sikh. Is it another instance of the weakness of
Hinduism, or an instance which points to a specific feature
of this religion which is possibly its strong point?

The answer depends on whether one is aware of this typically Hindu understanding of the relationship of the elements of religion, as also on whether one is inclined to regard it as a positive characteristic which opens up important possibilities, theoretically and practically. From what we have said so far it should be clear that this awareness and this inclination can suggest a whole new way of approaching the Hindu religion and the phenomenon of religion itself.

The Semitic religions, on the other hand, exhibit a certain rigidity in the relationship between creed, code and cult. Thus, it is generally held in these religions that the truly religious form of life can properly exist only in conjunction with a certain kind of doctrine and a certain form of worship. This idea permits, even encourages, the isolation of doctrines and rituals for examination of their validity.

It is in this way that we can better understand the semitic tendency to isolate the elements of the complex totality that we call religion: it is a consequence of the particular understanding of the interrelationship of these elements.

This tendency and this understanding go hand in hand
with the general approach of the Semitic theologians to the study of religions; this approach is, one might say, to try and understand the whole truth about a religion by a consideration of its parts or elements. Thus, for example, it is said that "even within the same religious tradition, every phenomenon, doctrinal ascetic or mystical, must be judged in itself in order to be able to extract its contents."  

This approach of the Semitic religions goes to make them 'Western' in spite of their Eastern origins. That is, these religions share with the modern Western philosophies their 'analytical' tendency by which is meant here the attempt at an isolated analysis of each part of each issue, with a review, of course, to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the whole. This effort to understand the whole in terms of the parts is, we have seen, fundamentally opposed to the Indian inclination to approach issues with an intuitive grasp of the whole which it tests and refines by a consideration of the parts but always as parts of the whole.

There is bound to be difficulties, some of them pretty serious, in both these approaches. That is not disputed here. But, whatever we might make of it, this difference in approach is there for all to see, that is, if we can for once dissuade ourselves from thinking that all these human attempts at salvation have got to be of the same kind.
In other words, we see the difference between the Semitic and the Hindu approaches if we disentangle ourselves from the cliches of our thought reinforced further by the cliches of our language.

It is not suggested here that individuals, or even groups, in either context have not opposed these general tendencies. Such opposition is bound to be there. At the same time, this opposition may be better understood as a foil, or as an exception, or even as a deviation from the normal course.

This may be explained with reference to the issue of "conversion" towards which we find two different and contrasting approaches in the two traditions. This issue is particularly useful here as it shows how some particular aspect of religion is often isolated and overemphasized in the process of spreading one's 'faith'.

The opponents of conversion have always been there in Christianity, no doubt; similarly there have been advocates of conversion in Hinduism. However, the fact remains that conversion as a systematic and sustained programme is supported by the Christian emphasis, for instance, on the doctrinal aspect of religion. Or, rather, this has been supported by the Christian/semitic understanding of religion wherein a certain kind of life is expected to go best with a certain
set of doctrines and the rituals and rules of conduct associated with it.

On the other hand, the attitude of viewing the creed, the code and the cult in their flexible relationship has generally tended to make the Hindus largely uninterested in the possibilities of conversion. There might of course be other reasons too for this general indifference of the Hindu to the particular faith one adopted; but, certainly, we have here a very plausible and, indeed, significant factor in the explanation of this 'indifference'.

Nor is it suggested here that there cannot be any change in this respect in the religions concerned, change which is consistent with their basic identity, and, as it appears, not with the perspective to which they belong.

It is here necessary to go into this question a little further. For, it appears, changes are taking place in the Christian approach to other religions. We shall now look briefly at the developments in the Catholic world, with special reference to the Indian church, leaving aside the 'confrontation' in Protestant theology between those who are for total discontinuity between the Christian message and the other religions, and those who are for continuity. It may however be noted here in passing that 'while the Barthian,
North European trend refuses any sort of participation in spirituality with the non-christians, the Afro-Asiatic trend allows it and passionately advocates it. Could it be significant that it is the Afro-Asian trend which is for a positive approach to other religions?

The confrontation or tension in Catholic Christianity would seem to be of a different kind. In fact the second Vatican Council is not a complete break with the past. It is a continuation and attempted consolidation of one of the trends which may be traced back to St. Paul himself, to his idea of the universal salvific will of God, and of the positive values of non-christian religions. At the same time the fact remains that Paul has contributed more than any other theologian to the development of an uncompromising attitude to other religions. Hence, it is not easy to understand Pauline theology as being consistent with the present day efforts to develop a positive approach to these religions. There are of course, attempts to explain Paul in such a way that this inconsistency is reduced.

Pope Clement XI condemned the jansenist Pasquier Quesnel for his position that no grace is given outside the church. It is this attitude that the second Vatican Council has tried to consolidate. The Council declared that "the right to freedom of religion belongs to human dignity." It
also maintained that the dictum "Extra ecclesiam nulla salus", meaning 'no salvation outside the Church', is to be understood not in an exclusive sense, but inclusively. But it is not quite correct to say that the Council has definitively turned away from the tradition of negative approach towards other religions. The very guarded way in which the Council recognizes salvation outside the Church is noteworthy: "Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience." The very assumption that it could be a 'fault' not to know 'the gospel of Christ or His Church', militates against a positive approach to the non-Christian religions.

As a result of this absence of a definitive and truly positive approach even in the Council declarations, the dictum 'Extra ecclesiam nulla salus' attributed to Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 250), holds good even today. It is certainly a very difficult task to deviate from an approach which has a history that is at least as long as the history of the Church. St. Augustine's comparison of the Church with the saving Ark of Noah had suggested that as there was no salvation outside the Ark at the time of Noah, there is no
salvation outside the Church. And the Church finds it extremely difficult to get out of this way of looking at the religions of the world.

At the same time "an important source of the negative attitude (of the Church) towards the non-christian religions was the unscientific and uncritical study and application of the Bible and its teaching."\[^{17}\] And, thanks to the Council, theologians have mustered the courage to say: "We now feel ashamed of being the posterity of that generation" which developed an "attitude of hatred and intolerance towards all non-christian religions"; they feel, "We are now grown enough to understand the defects and limitations of the earlier approach"; and they declare: "There is no more the question of one and only one true religion and that one religion trying to establish itself as 'the religion' for the whole of humanity."\[^{18}\] Hence the position that "Instead of straining ourselves to get more and more people into our own religious group, we have to set out as a force to meet the needs of the people struggling for a better human life."\[^{19}\]

But, "the emergence of an Indian theology ... derived from the age-old tradition of the religious reflection of this country",\[^{20}\] is, perhaps, not on the cards. For one thing, as we have been at pains to argue out, this tradition itself is understood very vaguely and in a distorted manner; and, for
another, within the Indian Church itself forces are still very active which tend to nullify whatever fresh thinking that the Vatican Council has made possible.

Here is an instance of the attempt to put the clock back by a few hundred years: "The delegates from India at the Synod of Bishops in 1974 articulated this theology in one of the interventions on behalf of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of India: ... To affirm that the religious practices of others, their sacred books and sacramental practices, provide a channel through which the Risen Christ reaches out to them, in no way threatens the uniqueness of Christ and his message. Rather, our theology will make clear that the uniqueness of Christianity lies in this: it excludes no religion; it embraces them all. These other religions, in which Christ is present but hidden, His Spirit secretly at work within them, are destined to find their fulfilment in the explicit recognition of Him who is the Lord of history." 21

One can understand the emphasis on the uniqueness of Christ in this theology. One can also imagine the possibility of interpreting Christianity as a religion which embraces all religions. But one fails to see the consistency between (a) the assurance that these religions are destined to find their fulfilment in the explicit recognition of Christ, and (b) the Council's exhortation to "acknowledge, preserve and
promote" the spiritual and moral good as well as the (other) values in the different cultures of the world.

Thus, obviously, there is some confusion in the field. The reason for this could be that the Council declarations do not involve a change of the basic framework, at least not clearly enough. If the basic framework does not encourage viewing the elements of creed, code and cult in their flexible interrelationship, then there will be a strong tendency to identify the theoretical component of Christianity as its essence, to isolate it, and to view it as a necessary component of any true religion. And this will naturally come into conflict with the tendency to appreciate and value other religions.

It appears that the kind of change or growth that is envisaged in the Semitic religions regarding their attitude towards other religions, cannot be a matter of degree, that is, if it is to be real change.

There is a tendency to think that the Christian attitude to other religions has progressively developed, from being one of hatred, and passing through phases of tolerance, dialogue, etc., to that of complementarity. But this view needs to be reconsidered, because the idea of such progressive change and the notion of a change of perspective do not seen to be quite consistent with each other.
To be able to live up to the demands of religious plurality, it seems, a religion has to adopt a total perspective which views each religion as a whole and not in terms of the parts or elements taken one by one; otherwise, the attempted change in the attitude towards other religions will amount to little more than making a virtue out of necessity.

It was argued in section (d) of the present chapter that there is in Hinduism a certain understanding of the role of symbols coupled with the recognition that one may not use certain symbols unless one wants to. And this was illustrated with reference to Gandhi's defence of idol-worship and the reasons he offered for this. This, it may be pointed out here, does not imply a complete denial of the recognition of the true role of symbols in the Semitic religions.

For instance, Paul Tillich, a western theologian of contemporary times, underscores the necessity of symbols in order to know the 'Unconditioned Transcendent' which transcends the distinction of the knower and the known and therefore cannot be made an object of knowledge; it can be understood through symbols alone. A symbol, according to Tillich, opens up levels of reality which are otherwise closed to us; it also unlocks dimensions of our soul, corresponding to the new aspects of the world it reveals.²⁴
There are some differences between Gandhi and Tillich in their views on the nature and role of symbols. While Gandhi thinks that God is not a mere symbol, Tillich distinguishes between God on the one hand, and the Unconditioned Transcendent on the other, thereby reducing God to a symbol. Tillich would further say that to regard God as the ultimate is finite particularization of the Divine and therefore a form of demonization of the Holy.\(^2\)

Tillich is perhaps not truly representative of the orthodox Christian approach to the issue of symbols. But, one way or another, there is the recognition of the role of symbols in the Semitic religions. And yet, surprisingly, this recognition gets extremely blurred when looking at other religions and their rituals. This would suggest that the understanding of the role of symbols here is somewhat confused.

No doubt, the variety and flexibility in matters of doctrines, rituals, etc. one comes across in Hinduism, combined with the apparent indifference of this religion to the creed to be adopted, perplexes the Semitic theologian. In the absence of a clear understanding of the role of symbols in worship, and of the role of rituals in religion as a whole, it is only natural that this perplexity tends to crystallize into notions of primitiveness and simplicity about this 'strange' religion that he confronts here.
The difficulty to understand Hinduism from the semitic standpoint may be summed up thus: what could possibly be regarded as just a different way of conceiving religion has become so difficult a phenomenon to understand, it has become 'intractable' to use Matilal's words, on account of the incongruity of the approach adopted for this purpose. A more suitable approach should help one to understand how in Hinduism different doctrines, rituals and codes of conduct combine in various ways and relate themselves to essentially the same ideal of perfection in life.

There is a method in this seeming madness; but to identify it we require an approach which is appropriate. This approach cannot have as its basis the same principle as that which Comte followed in arriving at 'belief in spiritual beings' as the 'minimum definition of religion'.

The very idea that there can be such a minimum definition as the one, for instance, with reference to an item of the belief aspect, is evidence of the kind of approach that Comte's attempts involved. This method of trying to understand a religion on the basis of an understanding of a minimum essence of religion, is bound to run into difficulties, especially when it is applied to the study of Hinduism. For, the 'minimum essence' is likely to be in terms of one or the other
element of religion and not in terms of the totality of the elements.

To conclude, the Semitic religions are found to share with many modern Western philosophies their accent on the theoretical or doctrinal aspect. This tendency to place the accent on theory or doctrine has to be traced to the peculiar turn of the Western mind which we have characterized as lacking in proper regard for the interrelationship of elements that constitute a whole. We have seen how this breaking up of the whole for analysis of its parts and for possible subsequent synthesis, involving as it often does an overemphasis on one or the other of the parts or elements isolated for this purpose, results at once in ignoring the other elements which are inherently related to it and in distorting the very element which is being emphasized.

(f) Implications for the Study of Religions

In this chapter our endeavour has been to show how, from the Indian standpoint, it is possible to approach an issue like idol-worship in such a way that its role is judged within its relationship with the other aspects of religion and not in isolation from them. We have also seen how this approach is permitted and encouraged by the Indian understanding of man's pursuit of the ultimate goal as an integral
effort wherein different aspects such as Experience, Thought and Life are related among themselves in a flexible a manner.

Thus it has been argued that the elements of creed, code and cult may be understood as parts or elements which are organically related among themselves in any particular religion and that there need not be a very rigid relationship between them. So much so that the kind of life which is understood as the ideal one can very well go with different sets of creed, code and cult. In so far as this is so, a consideration of any of these elements has to take into account, not just that element in isolation from the others, but the whole of these in their interrelationship. We have seen how failure to do this can result in the distortion of the element which is examined for its validity.

This has been illustrated with reference to Gandhi's defence of idol-worship, an item of the cult aspect of Hinduism. The very possibility of Gandhi's interpretation of this practice consistently with the basic tenents of Hinduism, and the force of this response to the charge of idol-worship, go to demonstrate the typical Hindu understanding of the flexible relationship of its elements, an understanding which militates against attempts to analyse this religion, or any religion for that matter, in terms of its parts taken in isolation.
According to Gandhi's interpretation, which might perhaps be the one which shows Hinduism in the best light possible, it is idolatry to imagine that only one's own form of worship is true worship.

While there is a genuine difficulty to understand Hinduism in terms of the usual definitions which are fairly applicable to the semitic religions, the fact remains that, not only it is possible for its adherents to attain the kind of perfection that religions all over the world aim at, it is also possible to defend this religion against the combined onslaught of the ardent believers in the semitic religions and the modern Indian critics whose roots happen to be in this very religion and philosophy.

This very possibility of its proper defence should be a sufficient reason to inquire into the possibility of this religion being basically different from the semitic religions, to inquire positively into its understanding of the ultimate goal of life and the means of attaining it, and to try to develop a method which is appropriate for this difficult task. It is precisely to the fulfilment of this task that we have directed our energies in the analysis so far.

This analysis and the understanding of Hinduism thus obtained have been supported by a brief discussion of the issue
of conversion. It was noted, in this connection, that the
semitic emphasis on the propagation of 'faith' contrast
sharply with the Hindu 'indifference' to the particular creed
or cult that one follows. We have argued that semitic exclu-
sivism, which is only reinforced, not met, by the modern
Western tendency to view things in isolation, is itself supp-
ported by the semitic inclination to isolate the elements of
religion from the living totality that it really is. Thus,
one could say, it is the isolation of the creed aspect from
the other aspects of religion, and from the kind of life which
the creed is to subserve, which directly leads to the misint-
erpretation of others' religions and accounts for the great
zeal in the matter of conversion.

The analysis presented in this chapter helps us to
find our way through a mass of somewhat controversial and
highly confusing literature, by modern scholars, on the issue
of the essential nature of Hinduism. It has been pointed out
by many that there is no clarity about what Hinduism actually
means. We have, in a sense, gone into this issue, and come
out with a different conclusion. There are idols, plenty of
them, and there is also this flexibility about it that one
may or may not worship them. Take the creed, or even the code;
there is the same flexibility. Now, if anything goes, how
can it be a religion? This was the question.
It was this question which troubled Ambedkar the most. He came to the conclusion that, as Hinduism has no definite creed, it cannot be called a religion. Krishnamurthi's contention that doctrines differ and therefore they cannot be regarded as important, is also related to this, because the underlying problem is the same, viz., that of applying a yardstick which is alien to the Indian approach to the issue of man's salvation.

Our argument has been that the Indian understanding of, and approach to, the elements of a whole is always in terms of the whole itself; that is, primarily, the understanding of the whole determines the understanding of the parts. Analysis there is; but it is always within a certain framework; it is within the framework of a flexible relationship of the elements; this framework is never lost sight of.

Such problems about the creed as mentioned by Ambedkar and Krishnamurthy, will not arise if the creed aspect is viewed in its flexible relationship with the aspects of code and cult thereby ensuring that the totality, which we have analysed in terms of these elements, is there to determine the direction of analysis. If the totality is what determines the course of analysis, then it is not difficult to see that the creed, providing as it does the theory about the self and its goal, may be an essential component of religion, and yet no
particular creed needs to be essential. Further, the justification of the creed need not wholly be in itself.

This understanding of Hinduism as involving a specific outlook which is different from that of the Semitic religions, also throws some light on the different ways in which the logics of these religions manifest in their historical working out. Thus, the European approach to the Red Indians in the colonies and the Hindu approach to the Ādivāsis (aborigins) may be fruitfully contrasted. But we shall not be able to go into this.

One of the difficulties encountered in the study of religions is how to reconcile the idea of the 'equality' of different religions with the obvious fact of their conflicting beliefs and sometimes conflicting practices. Our understanding of Hinduism, and of religion in general, helps in answering this question.

That all religions have produced great saints is possibly the strongest evidence in favour of this notion of 'equality' of religions. But this does not solve the puzzle as to how the different doctrines etc., to which the followers of different religions owe passionate allegiance, relate themselves to the kind of life that one aims at.

The argument in terms of the oneness of the goal,
which is often put forward to solve this puzzle and to explain the 'equality' of religions, is not without its share of problems. But we have seen, in connection with our discussion of the goal-orientation of Indian philosophy in the second chapter, that it is possible to argue for the essential oneness of the goal in spite of the varying descriptions. The goal, we have seen, is essentially one of self-realization or God-realization. The latter would be the proper description in the Western context where, not only the Semitic religions have God at the centre of their theology, but the metaphysics of different philosophical systems have again God at the centre; and the former would be the proper description in the Indian context where the self, and its distinction from the non-self, could be regarded as the central concern.

The descriptions of the goal as God-realization and self-realization could perhaps be understood better if one used the terminology and concepts which would help bring out their essential character; and this could in turn show how the two are essentially the same. Could we not say that it is a totally disciplined stage of development that one attains in both these cases? 'Discipline' not in the sense of a mere external discipline which can at best be described as the moral goal; 'discipline' in the sense of the perfect internalization and consolidation of the moral attainment,
which is best described as a spiritual attainment. Kierkegaard's distinction between the unstable moral stage and the stable religious state can perhaps help to see this meaning of the term 'discipline'.

The two arguments we have mentioned here for the 'equality' of religions, are not unrelated to each other; in fact, each involves the other. (a) The fact that all great religions have produced saints, and (b) the observation that the idea of total 'discipline', with the implied notions of perfection, harmony, and stability, is common to all religions - these are intimately related: to be a saint is to achieve perfection and harmony in life; it is to achieve a certain degree of discipline in one's life in relation to others, in relation to oneself, and in relation to God.

But for the saints, it would have been extremely difficult for us to understand religions properly. For, as we have already noted, if there can be problems due to the differences in doctrines and rituals, there will also be difficulties about the code aspect of religions. Thus, there will be undesirable and even unjustifiable practices in every culture finding their support in the scriptures of even the best religion that one can possibly take. Hence it becomes necessary to pin-point a proper point of contact with a religion, one which is different from and better than its creed, or its code, or its cult.
This point of contact with a religion should be such that it will, by and large, enable one to view the religion concerned positively, to see its strength first and to see its weaknesses and limitations in their relationship with its strength. And the saints, that is the best products of a religion, may be said to provide just that point of contact.

That we approach a particular religion, or religion in general, in this positive manner does not mean that we necessarily accept what we try to understand. Acceptance or rejection will, however, be meaningful only when the approach is thus positive.

It needs to be noted here that, if the saints, provide that best point of contact with any religion, it is primarily because in them the creed, the code and the cult manifest themselves in their organic relationship. On the one hand these elements are to be understood in relation to the realized person in whom these enter into a concrete relationship of a particular kind; on the other hand, the realized person is himself understood in relation to the totality of these and not as totally transcending these.

This implies two things: one, regarding the importance of the doctrinal, ritual and code aspects of religion in the midst of their differences and 'conflicts'; two, regarding
the very 'conflicts' among the creed/code elements of different religions.

As regards the first point, the understanding of religion we have tried to present here with reference to Hinduism, does not imply a denial of the importance of the individual elements such as the creed and the cult. Rather, the attempt has been to argue how the role each element plays is important and essential, though the same role could be played by something else in a different context. By assigning importance to the role that an element plays in a particular religion, we have been able to hold at once that the element is really important and that, yet, it is not to be regarded as indispensable in every context.

In short, it has been possible to (a) assign importance to the role an element plays, and through that to the element itself, and (b) identify the understanding of a flexible relationship of elements as the characteristic feature of Hinduism. Not only (a) and (b) do not conflict between them, they impact support and help each other.

As for the 'conflicts' among the doctrines of different religions, our understanding of religion in general and of Hinduism in particular enables us to deny this in a meaningful sense.
Flexibility in the relationship between creed, code and cult, it has been noted, refers to the possibility of different doctrines and rituals, and even different codes of conduct, going consistently with the same kind of life which is regarded as the ideal one. This understanding implies that opposition between religions at the doctrinal or ritual level need not necessarily mean a real opposition between them; it is possible that opposition in doctrinal matters, for instance, is consistent with the view that two religions which are thus opposed may both be equally true.

Truth of a religion is here understood in terms of the truth of life, the life of the realized person, which is real and imparts reality, in varying degrees, to the lives of the people around him.

As Coomaraswamy puts it, "the mere presence of these men in a society,... by its affirmation of ultimate values, affects all values." If we are correct in arguing that all values are really affirmed when any one of them is properly affirmed, then the truth of any religion is in the integration of dharma, artha, kama and moksa in the lives of the perfected souls.
NOTES AND REFERENCES: CHAPTER 6

(References are to the editions mentioned in the Bibliography)


3. In his doctoral thesis *Dialogue of Religions*, submitted to the Karnatak University in 1981, Dr. A. Pushparajan has discussed this in considerable detail. My brief discussion of the views of Dayananda and Rammohun Roy is based on this.

3a. Young India, 6 10 - 21, p. 318.

4. RTAV, See K.B. Works II, p. 60. Quoted by A. Pushparajan

5. S.P. (pp. 209 - 216) Quoted by A. Pushparajan.

6. Young India, 26 - 9 - 1929, p. 320


8. Ibid., p. 70

9. 1 Tim. 2; 4 ff.

10. Acts. 17:23


13. Declaration of Religious Freedom (DH - 2)

14. Declaration on Ecumenism (UR - 3)
15. Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (LG - 7, 14)

16. De Civ. Dei, XV c. 26

17. Pathrapankal, J., Studies in Bible and Theology, p. 128

18. Ibid. p. 156

19. Ibid. p. 178

20. Ibid. p. 179


22. Nostra Aetate 2

23. Pathrapankal, J., p. 155


25. Mandal, P.N., "Gandhi and Paul Tillich ..." (See ref. No.24 above)


28. Kierkegaard, S., The Stages on Life's Way. The reference here is to the distinction between the aesthetic, the moral and the religious stages. I have come across this indirectly, and have not been able to get at the work mentioned here.

29. Coomaraswamy, A.K., Hinduism and Buddhism, p. 29