

**Philosophy and Religions as ‘ways of life’  
albeit differently**

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**The Abstract**

Following in the tradition of the ancients of the like of Socrates, Plato and the Stoics, the article delves into the implications of, not philosophy as a discipline, an intellectual speculation, studied in academic institutions but, philosophizing as an activity influencing daily life of the individual so engaged. Such a pursuit undoubtedly shapes not only one’s thoughts but also attitudes and actions. The ancients were convinced that philosophy should not be confined to abstract contemplation, but rather should guide individuals in living virtuous and fulfilling lives.

In this context, philosophy becomes a practical tool for self-improvement and ethical decision-making. It involves reflection on fundamental questions about the nature of reality, knowledge, ethics, and the human condition. By integrating philosophical ideas into everyday life—such as practicing critical thinking, examining one’s values and beliefs, seeking wisdom from various traditions—individuals can develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

Religions on the other hand, either cosmic or meta-cosmic, historical or mythical, are ritualizations or structurelizations or institutionalizations of originary experiences of individual(s) which develop into divergent spiritualities dependent on diverse cultural context and circumstances. While these spiritualities remain as the basis of any religion, in the course of history the ritualization gets so reified that they become the only elements that are emphasized and taken as the essence of that particular religion. However, religions, either Mesopotamian or Indic, almost all or the majority of them have always emphasized them as ‘ways of life’. As a way of life it refers to the idea that religion is not just a set of beliefs or rituals but a comprehensive framework that shapes and guides all aspects of a person’s existence. It provides a system of beliefs and values that shape how individuals perceive the world, understand their purpose, and relate to others. These beliefs often include teachings about morality, ethics, and the nature and meaning of existence.

The article concretely deals with several religions both Mesopotamian and Indic showing as to how they are primarily particular ways of life rather than institutions or structures or even rituals. Thus viewing religion as a way of life emphasizes its role in providing meaning, purpose and guidance for the particular community of adherents and for the individuals seeking to live in accordance with their faith traditions.

Thus the article attempts to respond to the malady of secularism proposing philosophy and religion as ways of life to be the possible remedies. While philosophy is a general way of life, open to the entire humanity, within that general framework, religion becomes a particular way of life of the adherents of a specific religion.

Key Words: Philosophy, religion, ‘way of life’...

## **Introduction**

To arrive at an all-inclusive and generally agreeable definition of 'philosophy' is notoriously difficult, if not impossible. However, here we are not looking at philosophy as an academic discipline taught in Institutions of higher learning such as in Universities or in Seminaries but as an activity of philosophizing. In the same manner, we are not looking at religions as a set of norms and mores but as all-embracing attitude to life that guide ones total existence. Hence the objective of this study is to present philosophy and religion as ways of life that guide and shape one's existence, though differently. Given that, the study uses textual analysis as its methodology.

## **Philosophizing as an Activity**

Philosophizing as an activity implies a host of attitudes and approaches. First of all, the ability to say what one means and to mean what one says. In other words, one has to acquire the habit of *defining* words one uses. However it must immediately be noted that in religious matters one - if one is a believer - is bound to discover that one cannot form clear and distinct concepts of what one intends to speak about and if words are signs of concepts, the words one has to use to express such unconceptualizable (to coin a word!) realities, one cannot define them. But to become *aware of this* and to make provisions for it – in one's thought and speech – is already a mark of good philosophizing or quality of a good philosopher.

Secondly it implies that one acquires the skill – for it is a skill - to argue in a strict logical way. A student of Logic is well aware of the many pitfalls into which one can fall and thus argue invalidly and /or fallaciously. A logical fallacy is not simply an erroneous argument, it is more the reason why one, without perhaps fully realizing it, falls into a trap, as it were, and is thus unconsciously led to come to false conclusions.

Thirdly, it implies the skill of understanding the other – which is not an easy task. A good philosopher acquires an *empathy* with views of others even when these radically differ from one's own. One has to learn not only to listen and understand what the other says (which is already saying a lot!) but to read, as it were, into (*intus-legere*) what the other, by means of words want to convey perhaps without fully succeeding. Above all one has to try, if need be, to reach with the other's help, to a higher truth than the one held by either of the interlocutors.

Fourthly, it implies the ability of critical thinking - to discern what is to be accepted and what is not. But one does so on the basis of sound reasons. The difficulty here is to see what can count as a sound reason. Often common sense suffices for the same. At other times, competence of the subject-matter under discussion is required. But here again a good philosopher would acknowledge the limitations of his competence in the field in question and would know how to abstain from any kind of dogmatizing. To be aware of one's limitations in this respect, to know that one does not know, is a sign of a good philosopher. A good philosopher would certainly not "rush in where angels fear to tread." A good philosopher knows when to speak and when to keep silent.

Finally, Clarity of thought implies much more. It implies the ability to see *through* a problem, as it were. Often, seemingly a single problem is in reality a complexity of problems, i.e. a problematic. And the ability to distinguish one problem from another is, an important characteristic of good philosophizing.

### **Aspects of Socratic Philosophy as a Way of Life**

Socrates, often considered the father of Western philosophy, viewed philosophy as a way of life that encompasses ethics, self-examination, and the pursuit of virtue. His approach to philosophy went beyond mere intellectual inquiry; it was deeply intertwined with living a good life. The oft quoted dictum of Socrates in Plato's 'Apology' (38a5-6)<sup>1</sup>: "The unexamined life is not worth living," highlights his belief that self-reflection and critical examination of one's beliefs, values, and actions are essential to achieving a fulfilling life. The basic thought behind this phrase is that an unexamined life can be seen as a stagnant one—without growth, development, and exploration of our own thoughts and ideas. Further for Socrates knowledge and virtue were closely connected. He asserted that "... virtue is knowledge ..." (Plato, 'Meno' 89 C) and believed that if people truly understood what was good, they would act accordingly. This implies that philosophical inquiry is essential for ethical living. Here Meno goes on to argue that based on the above hypothesis, that virtue is knowledge the conclusion that virtue must be taught can be drawn. However it may be argued here that virtue cannot be taught as a piece of information but rather, it must be practiced in life.

The well-known Socratic dialogue or better still the dialectic method involves asking probing questions to stimulate critical thinking and illuminate ideas. This method, exemplified in Plato's Euthyphro, encourages individuals to question their assumptions and arrive at deeper truths through discussion. Here the dialogue ultimately ends without a satisfactory definition of piety, embodying the Socratic method of inquiry. Socrates demonstrates that true understanding often requires grappling with complex ideas rather than settling for simplistic answers (14e-15a).

Further, Socrates saw the role of the philosopher as a guide to others in the pursuit of truth and ethical living. He engaged in dialogues with fellow Athenians, highlighting the importance of communal inquiry and the sharing of wisdom. His role as a "gadfly" aimed to awaken others from complacency (Plato, 'Apology'). Socrates believed that living ethically was fundamental to the good life. He practiced what he preached, prioritizing moral integrity over societal approval, as evidenced in his refusal to escape from prison despite the opportunity (Plato, 'Crito'). He maintained that true happiness comes from living virtuously rather than pursuing material wealth. Socrates spoke of a "daemonic sign" or inner voice that guided him in making moral choices (Plato, 'Apology'). This suggests that he believed in an internal moral compass, which is crucial for ethical living.

In conclusion we can certainly assert that for Socrates, philosophy was not merely an academic discipline; it was a comprehensive way of life that demanded continuous questioning, ethical living, and a commitment to personal and communal growth. His legacy endures through the emphasis on self-examination and the intrinsic link between knowledge and virtue, laying foundational ideas for subsequent philosophical thought. His teachings encourage individuals to pursue wisdom and live authentically, making philosophy a vital aspect of human existence.

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Plato's dialogues are taken from: Plato 1961. The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Ed. by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton University Press.

## The Stoics

Certainly, Philosophy as a way of life is a central tenet of Stoicism, one of the Hellenistic philosophies that emphasizes the development of self-control, virtue, and rationality as means to achieve a good life. Stoicism teaches that philosophy is not just an abstract study but a practical guide for living. The Stoics believed that philosophy should be actively integrated into daily life. As Epictetus famously stated: "It is not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters" ('Enchiridion', 5). This emphasizes the importance of internal control over external circumstances. For them, virtue (*arete*) is the only true good, and living in accordance with virtue is the ultimate aim of life. Seneca articulates this in his letters, asserting: "A good character, as a well-tuned instrument, produces the right notes" ('Letters to Lucilius', 116). This underscores the Stoic belief that ethical and virtuous living is essential to achieving *eudaimonia* (flourishing or happiness). They also emphasized the practice of mindfulness and reflection. Marcus Aurelius, in his 'Meditations', reflects on the importance of being present and accepting the natural flow of life: "You have power over your mind—not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength" ('Meditations', 6.6). This highlights the Stoic focus on cultivating an inner state of tranquillity through rational thought and acceptance.

Stoicism is also communitarian as it advocates for a sense of belonging to a larger community. The Stoics viewed all human beings as part of a universal community, which they referred to as the "*cosmopolis*." Seneca expressed this idea, stating: "We are waves of the same sea, leaves of the same tree, flowers of the same garden" ('Letters to Lucilius', 36). This perspective encourages ethical behaviour towards others and a sense of shared humanity. In conclusion it may be clearly asserted that Stoicism champions the idea that philosophy is inherently practical and should guide everyday decisions and attitudes. By fostering virtue, cultivating inner peace, and emphasizing community, Stoicism provides a comprehensive framework for living a meaningful life. Stoicism views philosophy as a transformative practice that shapes individuals' lives and interactions with the world.

## Pierre Hadot<sup>2</sup>

In contemporary times Pierre Hadot's work "Philosophy as a Way of Life" brought to prominence the same phrase. In the chapter that carries the phrase and from which the volume gets its title Hadot asserts that in the ancient world "philosophy was a way of life," a "mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual's life" (Hadot, 1995, 265). He further explains that Philosophy as love of wisdom, "does not merely cause us to know: it makes us 'be' in a different way."<sup>3</sup>

He continues: "Ancient philosophy proposed to mankind an art of living. By contrast, modern philosophy appears above all as the construction of a technical jargon reserved for specialists" (Hadot, 1995, p. 272). Hadot also claims that not only the ancients who held that view but also moderns such as Descartes, Spinoza, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche held on to this view of philosophy as a way of life. Ironically he holds that it is no coincidence that none of these held university positions (Hadot 1995, 271 – 2). Elsewhere, Hadot lists a host of other European thinkers such as Goethe, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Merleau-Pont who also thought of philosophy as a way of life and not as an academic discipline (Hadot, 1995, *passim*).

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<sup>2</sup> 'Philosophy as a Way of Life' gained popularity with the publication of a book in 1995 with the same title by Pierre Hadot, a French philosopher and scholar of ancient philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in John Sellars, What is Philosophy as a way of life? *Parrhesia* 28, 2017 pp 40-56, here p. 40.

## Religions and Spiritualities

While, it may still be held that everyone has his or her own philosophy of life which guides them at least some time in their lives, it remains not spelt out, and the spelt out version of it will continue to be confined to the academic circles. Further, it may also be held that such an un-spelt out Philosophy of life is open to all and not restricted to a particular affiliation, unless one means by that belonging to a particular school of philosophy. Whereas religious affiliations are particularized and hence one belongs to a particular religious affiliation or the other, unless one is an avowed, atheist. Hence religion as a way of life is specific and particular.

Before we proceed to consider particular religions as ways of life, let us consider some commonalities, which most would agree forms part of religion. First and foremost, religions offer guidance for behaviour. Religious teachings often provide guidelines and commandments that dictate moral behaviour, ethical conduct, and interpersonal relationships. These guidelines serve as a moral compass for adherents. Thus religions typically contain a specific yet comprehensive worldview and perspective that shapes how adherents understand the nature of reality, the meaning of life, suffering, death, and their place in the universe. This perspective can profoundly influence how individuals interpret and respond to life's challenges and experiences. Religion also serve as a catalyst for personal growth and transformation. Through spiritual practices, reflection, and adherence to religious teachings, individuals may seek to improve themselves morally, spiritually, and emotionally. Thus it helps integration into daily life. For many believers, religion is not confined to specific times or places of worship but is integrated into their daily routines, influencing decisions, actions, and interactions with others. It is in this sense religion often fosters a sense of community and belonging among its adherents. Religious communities provide social support, encouragement, and a sense of identity that can be important for individuals' emotional and spiritual well-being. Last but not least, religion typically involves rituals, ceremonies, and practices that help adherents express their faith, connect with the divine, and reinforce communal bonds. These rituals can include prayers, worship services, sacraments, fasting, and pilgrimages.

The last point needs further reflection. While all the above are true to some extent, at the popular level, most organized forms of religions are ritualizations of the originary<sup>4</sup> experiences of the founders. It is these experiences that develop into spiritualities varying on cultural context and circumstances. Whenever the institutionalized religions tended to lose their dynamism to enliven the adherents, it is these spiritualities that revitalize the religions. These spiritualities have always emphasized them as 'ways of life.' As 'ways of life' these are comprehensive framework that shapes and guides all aspects of a person's existence. They provide a system of beliefs and values that shape how individuals perceive the world, understand their purpose, and relate to others. These beliefs often include teachings about morality, ethics, and the nature and meaning of existence.

## Judaism

In Judaism, *Torah* is the instruction in the way of life and the *Halacha* is the course of life. Hebrew language has numerous words for "way": street (*shuq*), alley (*chuts*), highway (*mesillah*), course (*halik*), track (*magal*), avenue (*natib*), path (*orach*), and movement (*ashur*). The word "way" (*derek*) occurs most frequently (700 times). *Derek*

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<sup>4</sup> By which we mean the deepest possible spiritual experiences of the founders of religions – be it The Buddha, The Prophet Mohammad or Jesus Christ or even of the Indian Sages which are enshrined in the *Sruti* and *Smirti*, to mention the four major world religions.

refers to human behaviour. As a "way of life" two aspects interlock: the course of life which is a person's lot and the attitude(s) s/he develops within it.

Intrinsically connected with making one's life journey is the teaching of the way: "I teach you the way of wisdom" (Prov. 4:11). "Teaching" (*torah*) is derived from the verb "to point out" (*varah*). To the pious it is Be-er himself who points out the way of life (Prov. 16:9). The way of Be-er and the way of the pious interlock: "Who are they that stand in awe of Be-er? He points out to them the way they choose" (Ps. 25:12). The way the pious choose is the way Be-er points out (Ps.1:6; 25:4-5, 9; 27:11; 103:7; 143:8). That way leads to perfection: "The Mighty One! His way is sound The Mighty One! He makes my way sound" (Ps. 18:31, 33). It is "the way ever-lasting" (Ps. 139:24).

It is further developed in the rabbinical *halacha*. "The word derives from the Hebrew word *halach* 'to go': accordingly it means the 'true going,' the conduct God desires. Jewish religion views itself as the way of life humans should go." This *halachah* — the oral *torah* — enjoys a certain independence with respect to the written *torah*. "Generally speaking, the *halachah* is already fixed before it is grounded in Scripture." The aim of Jewish spirituality is to align one's life journey with God's instruction. The God of Israel is the great God of the way, who travels that way through the life of his believers.

### **Christianity**

In Christian Spirituality Jesus Christ is 'The Way'. The life of Jesus is viewed by Christian spirituality as "the true way of life" (John 14:6). His life as an itinerant preacher ends on the road to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51; Matt. 19:1-2; Mark 10:1), an "exodus" (Luke 9:31) which leads into death. "Following" this way evokes a deep dread (Mark 10:32). Further, discipleship means following Christ up to and into death (Mark 8:34). The narrow track (Matt. 7:14) is not a dead-end road; from the perspective of God it is a way to life. That's why Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). The way of Jesus is viewed as the model for the life of every Christian. The history of Christian spirituality illustrates this in a richly variegated way. The Acts of the Apostles has numerous instances where this is repeatedly affirmed (Acts 9:2; cf. 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). In fact the early Christians were referred to as the 'followers of the way'.

### **Hinduism**

'Hinduism' is not a single religion but a geographical name for a group of six religions, philosophies and schools of thought. However in general in the Indian thought, we mainly find the three *Mārgas*. The *Jñāna Mārga* (path of wisdom): The Upanishads which are known as the *Jñāna Kānda*, speak of realizing the unity of *Brahman* as *Ātman*. The *Karma Mārga* (path of action), and the *Bhakti Mārga* (path of devotion), the path followed by all the bhakti saints of all religious traditions. The Bhagavad Gīta speaks of *Nish Kama Karma*, the desire less action.

### **Buddhism**

Buddhism teaches all, the way to Enlightenment. The Three Main Currents of Buddhist Spirituality: (1) The Little Vehicle (*hinaya.no*), or "the vehicle of the listener" (*sravakayana*) or "the school of the elders" (*theravada*), embraces the most ancient Buddhist traditions. (2) The Great Vehicle (*mahayana*), which originated at the time of early Christianity, has a broad view of the way to salvation. It promises the salvation of Enlightenment (*bodddhi*) not just to those who submit to monastic disciplines, but also to lay persons, provided they keep certain rules and exercise certain virtues. (3) The

Diamond Vehicle (*va.jra.yana*) also called tantric Buddhism, arose in the 4th-5th century. For this vehicle gestures (*mudra*), ritual formulas (*mantras*) and expressions of deeper insight (*mandala*) are important aids on the way to Enlightenment.

### **Islam**

Islamic spirituality is grounded in the *Quran* (God's self-communication) and the *Sunna* of the Prophet (his way of conducting himself in the various situations of life). Combined, these two sources form the *shariah* which is related to the notion of "way" (= *shar*). The *shariah* serves as the main road which every believer travels. The predominant orientation of the *Quran* is the absolute Oneness of God (Sura 73/19; 76/29). Those who recite and deeply interiorize the *Quran* will realize with increasing intensity that God is the One and only God. That which is true for the *Quran* also applies to the life of the Prophet Mohammed. Externally Mohammed is the lawgiver; internally he is the incarnation of the spiritual way. From his life the believer can read the way to God.

The path of the mystics, the *tariqah*, is considered a branch of the broad *mriah* which all Muslims walk. The *shariah*, as it were, constitutes the objective framework within which the mystics go their own specific way of complete consecration. Of decisive significance for this way is the experience of the teachers, needed — to start going the spiritual way — is an initiation under the guidance of an experienced spiritual leader (*sheik*).

### **East Asian Religions**

Of the East Asian religions Taoism is the way which sustains and permeates the all. The Chinese noun *tao* means "way." The verb means "to point the way" or "to go the way." All things in some way or other find their unity in the principle of the "way." For 4,000 years this idea has been operative in areas of Chinese culture and permeates all forms of Chinese spirituality. It has been lived and thought through in a particular way in Taoism. To this Confucianism and Shintoism may also be added as the former is considered as a philosophy of life, as theory and practice, the latter is the way of the gods.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, embracing philosophy as a way of life, it is 'love of wisdom' that encourages ongoing inquiry, personal growth, greater self-awareness and insight into one's place in the world - values which have been central to many philosophical traditions - thus leading to a commitment to an examined existence rather than making decisions based on impulses or pressures. It emphasizes the importance of thoughtful introspection and engagement with profound ideas in guiding our behaviour and shaping our character. Religions on the other hand are shown to be clearly ways of life that are rooted in the spiritualities of those religions for those adherents which provide them with the meaning of life itself.

Viewed in these perspectives, it is my firm conviction that philosophy and religions can be seen to be an antidote to the secularistic mentality that shuns all religious values and at times goes contrary to ethical upright living.

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