Can the Tanak, the Bible and the Qur'an be Regarded as Sruti?

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I

A comparative philosophy of religion could result from any of several motives.[1] Thus, for some scholars, it means an 'objective

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[1] See Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedānta: a Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1973), Preface: '"Comparative Philosophy" means many things to different scholars and thinkers. To some it means an exploration of non-Western philosophies (and religions) in order to find, to accept, or to assimilate those values, ideas, and concerns that one believes to be missing in one's own culture; to others it means an objective, scholarly examination of various individual thinkers and schools of Asian philosophy, and sometimes the comparing and contrasting of these with leading Western examples, in order to promote greater knowledge and understanding of the East; and still to others it means an articulation of the basic "ways of thinking" which are exhibited as persistent cultural traits in various civilizations both for the sake of knowledge and for a possible synthesis of Western and Eastern philosophy. Through the immense efforts of many workers in all these areas of comparative philosophy Westerners, with an interest in Asia, have come to an understanding of the patterns and structures of thought in Asian cultures, of the history of various traditions in the East, and of the intricacies and subtleties of specific systems and individuals in these traditions. A great deal of work still remains to be done in all these areas, and indeed an enormous amount of significant research in comparative philosophy is being carried out today by both Western and Eastern scholars.

'But it is also becoming increasingly apparent that we are ready to pursue new goals in comparative philosophy and to bring comparative philosophy into the mainstream of *creative* thought—East and West. We are aware now that there is much of intrinsic philosophical value and interest in Asian thought and that consequently this thought need not be cast merely in the mold of a historical (or exotic) curiosity. Students ought to be able to study Asian philosophy simply for the purpose of enriching their philosophical background and enabling them to deal better with the philosophical problems that interest them. Without losing sight of the distinctive and sometimes unique characteristics of a tradition one ought to be able to concentrate on a tradition as it

scholarly examination of various individual thinkers and schools of Asian philosophy, and sometimes the comparing and contrasting of these with leading Western examples, in order to promote greater knowledge and understanding of the East.'[2] In this paper an effort will be made to move along these lines on the question of *Śruti* or Revelation in Hinduism.[3]

It is helpful to begin by distinguishing among three terms which are often used in this context: *śabda-pramāṇa*, *śruti* and *veda*. *Śabda-pramāṇa* is the broadest category and covers verbal testimony as a means of valid knowledge. This 'testimony may be of the Veda (*vaidika*) or of secular speech (*laukika*).'[4] In this paper we are concerned with the former.

Usually the words *śruti* and *veda* are used synonymously[5] and the authority of the Vedas is regarded as supremely valid in spiritual matters in most schools of Hindu thought. It would be tedious to trace the exact connotation of the Vedas as revelation in each school of Hindu thought; it would also be repetitious as this has already been done.[6]

is a response to a series of universal questions and problems, and with the express intention that these responses will influence one spontaneously in one's own thinking. A new goal for comparative philosophy, in short, would be to approach Asian philosophy as material for creative thought. I am quite convinced that on its merit Asian philosophy is indeed worthy of being approached in this spirit. This little book is but one small effort pointing in the direction of that goal.'

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] One should note, however, that in the context of some schools of Hindu philosophy, 'If we are to form a proper understanding of the meaning and scope of "Revelation", we do well to forget at once the implications of the term in the Mediterranean religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Strictly speaking, "Revelation" is a misnomer, since ultimately there is no revealer. The Sanskrit term for it is *śruti*, literally, 'the hearing,' which means an erudition acquired by listening to the instruction of a teacher. This instruction itself had been transmitted to the teacher through an uninterrupted series of teachers that stretches to the beginning of creation.' Eliot Deutsch and J.A.B. van Buitenen, *A Source Book of Advaita Vedānta* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1971), p. 5.

[4] T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Outlines of Hinduism* (Bombay: Chetana Ltd., 1960), p. 105. This is the position in the *Nyāya* school.

[5] M. Hiriyanna, *Popular Essays in Indian Philosophy* (Mysore: Kavyalaya Publishers, 1952), p. 27; etc. Although the two words are usually taken as synonymous, sometimes a distinction is drawn between the two, in which case the Vedas are treated as a subset of *śruti* which is then equated with "revelation" in general and the Vedas are regarded as a particular revelation [see P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, Vol. I, Part I (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1968), p. 5, n. 15].

[6] See K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedanta* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 238-239. For more on

Prof. M. Hiriyanna has identified two approaches to the question of verbal testimony in spiritual matters as constitutive of the Hindu approach. It seems a more useful exercise, at this point, to identify these two approaches and then to apply them to revelation as visualized in the Semitic tradition, in the hope that fresh insights may thus result.

II

One may begin by asking: how can one determine the reliability of religious experience, that is, a form of experience which is beyond the realm of direct sense perception? M. Hiriyanna argues that 'To suppose that the senses and reason are the only sources of knowledge is to restrict reality to what is ordinarily experienced by us. But such a restriction of the realm of being does not satisfy all.'[7] Now how are those of us who are not 'satisfied' to gain knowledge about that realm as 'it is obviously futile to postulate such a transcendental realm as an unknowable something'?[8] There thus arises the 'need for an appropriate *pramāṇa* whereby we may know it or, at least, that part of it which is of significance to us.'[9]

Professor Hiriyanna points out that of the Hindu systems of thought, we may take the *Nyāya* and *Sāṇkhya* as examples of one type of approach to obtaining knowledge about the transcendental realm. This type of approach he relates to the concept of *yogi-pratyakṣa* as a *pramāṇa*.

> This *pramāṇa* is usually termed *yogi-pratyakṣa* or the intuitive vision of the *yogin*. It is conceived as fitted not merely to disclose extra-empirical facts to us, but also to make them known immediately. That is the reason why it is designated *pratyakṣa*, although it does not involve the activity of the external senses and is therefore very different from common perception. This intuitive power is found in all men, but only in a latent form; and a good deal of practice in meditation is required to develop it properly. Meditative practice, however, is not the only condition for its development; a cleansing of the inner life is also needed. It means that until 'the busy intellect and striving desires' are stilled, one cannot rise higher than mere reflective thought. The successful cultivation of this power is

the *Sāṇkhya* view on this point see Satischandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* (University of Calcutta, 1968), p. 279; and for more on the *Vaiśeṣika* view see Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I (London: Cambridge University Press, 1957), pp. 332, fn. 3, 355.

It may be pointed out that the application of the notion of revelation in a particular school of Hindu philosophy to the Semitic tradition may be a useful exercise and the possibilities here have not been exhausted. For an illustration see Eliot Deutsch and J.A.B. van Buitenen, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[7] M. Hiriyanna, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[9] *Ibid.*

consequently not possible for ordinary men, and whatever knowledge they possess of truths attained through it is derived from others and is mediate. The association of moral purity with what is essentially a logical means of knowledge indicates, we may observe by the way, the close connection that has always subsisted in India between religion and philosophy.[10]

It should be noted that in using the above *pramāṇa* 'we depend... entirely upon the authority of individual insight.'[11] This has its pitfalls:

> In this appeal to the experience of an individual, others see a risk; for, in their view, nobody's private insight can carry with it the guarantee of its own validity. As Kumārila has remarked in discussing a similar topic, a vision that has unfolded itself to be one single person may after all be an illusion. This is not to impugn the good faith of the *yogin;* it only means that he might be self-deluded. To avoid this possible defect of subjectivity, the opponents of the above view postulate in the place of *yogic* perception another *pramāṇa*, viz., *śruti* or 'revelation'—otherwise known as the Veda—which, it is claimed, will not mislead us because it has emanated from God or is supernatural in some other sense.[12]

However, if one takes recourse to the supernatural in such a way then 'belief in such a source of knowledge may appear to be mere dogmatism and it is therefore necessary to find out what in reality is signified by this term,'[13] *śruti* or revelation. M. Hiriyanna proceeds to identify its 'correct' connotation:

> As commonly explained, the *śruti* is immemorial tradition which, because its origin cannot be traced to any mortal being, is looked upon as supernatural in its character. There is the implication here, as contrasted with the previous view, that the realm of transcendental beings is not directly accessible to man, however gifted he may be. But, theological considerations apart, it must be admitted that the truths for which the Veda stands, whether or not it is now possible to ascribe them to specific seers, should eventually be traced to some human source; and the fact seems to be implied in the description of those truths as having been seen by the *ṛṣis* or inspired sages of old. If it be so, the Veda also must be reckoned as communicating to us the results of *yogic* perception. But there is a very important difference as may be gathered from a condition which is sometimes laid down as essential to all 'revealed' teaching, viz., that it should have proved acceptable to the best minds of the com-

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

munity (*mahājana-parigraha*). That is, the truths which the Veda records have not been merely intuited by great seers but also acknowledged by the standard mind of the community. Really, then, this *pramāṇa* reduces itself to what may be characterised as 'race intuition'; and its deliverances, by virtue of the objective value they thus possess, acquire an authority which cannot belong to those of anybody's private intuition. Herein lies the superiority of *śruti* to *yogic* perception. The Mīmāṁsā and the Vedānta are the systems that accept 'revelation' in this sense as the means to a knowledge of supersensuous truth.[14]

Thus those who do not regard the realm of being as exhausted by the world of common experience formulate 'a unique *pramāṇa* for comprehending what lies beyond.'[15] This group is divisible into 'two classes—one which believes that individual insight is adequate for a knowledge of the transcendental realm; and the other, which seeks the aid of revelation for it,'[16] where revelation implies collective approval of spiritual insights as distinguished from mere individual insight. 'This classification indicates. . .the exact meaning of *śabda* or 'verbal testimony' which so many schools reckon as a source of philosophical knowledge.'[17]

III

In the above discussion Hiriyanna distinguishes between yogic perception and revelation on the basis of the latter being yogic perception which is not merely individual insight but is 'acknowledged by the standard mind of the community.'[18] Thus yogic perception with communal approval attains the status of revelation.

It seems possible, however, to apply this criterion of communal approval at another level. In the above discussion the *results* of yogic perception were regarded as subject to communal approval before they could be treated as revelation. But the same criterion could also be applied at the level of the obtaining of those results. An example will help clarify the point. A discovery or an invention could be made by an individual scientist or a team of scientists. (It could also be made simultaneously by two individual scientists or teams of scientists as well.) In a similar way one can distinguish between an *individual in-*

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[16] *Ibid.* M. Hiriyanna goes on to say that 'These may together be described as intuitionalism. . .They differ in their estimate of the relative significance of life of the two realms of being, as also in their conception of the precise nature of the facts that may be intuited' (*ibid.*, p. 29). He also adds that the two approaches possess a 'kinship which explains the alliance between the two as seen in the later history of the systems. Thus the Nyāya and the Sāṅkhya, as now known, combine a belief in the Veda with their recognition of the need for *yogic* perception' (*ibid.*, fn. 1).

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[18] M. Hiriyanna, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

tuition which comes to be accepted by the 'standard mind of the community' and a *communal or collective intuition* which comes to be accepted by the 'standard mind of the community.' The words of the Buddha would seem to illustrate the former case, the corpus of the Vedas the latter, especially as the Vedas are the work, not of one seer or *ṛṣi*, but of many seers.[19] Thus, while Buddhism would represent the case of an individual intuition obtaining general acceptance, Hinduism represents, in the case of the Vedas, *collective intuition* winning communal acceptance.[20] If this distinction between individual and collective intuition is now applied to the Semitic religious tradition, interesting results follow. Firstly, Christianity and Islam, as they are ultimately founded around the intuitions of two individuals—Jesus and Muhammad—belong to one category and Judaism to the other, as it seems to represent a case of collective intuition, in that it seems to have been founded not so much by an individual as by a series of prophets, the most prominent among them being Abraham and Moses. Secondly, inasmuch as the word *śruti*, in the context of collective intuition, involves a plurality of sponsors involved in receiving the intuition, only Judaism could be called a revealed religion under this classification. Christianity and Islam would be the products of yogic intuition, so to say. But although under this description the scriptures of Christianity and Islam could not be called *śruti*, they certainly belong to the class of *śabda pramāṇa* for under this category are included both 'yogic intuition' and 'revelation'.

One should note here that, strictly speaking, *śruti* cannot be called revelation at all by Semitic standards in those schools of Hindu thought which regard the *śruti* as authorless, as in the Semitic tradition revelation always implies a revealer—God.[21]

How is it, then, one may ask, that while from a Semitic point of view Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all regarded as revealed religions, from the Hindu point of view as developed above only one of them—Judaism—qualifies to be so called? The answer seems to lie in the fact that while the Hindu position as developed above focuses on

[19] The discussion will have to be modified if the immediate followers of the Buddha are regarded as the co-founders of Buddhism.

[20] It may be pointed out that the *Nyāya* position on the Vedas complicates the picture here. For if God is the author of the Vedas then it has only one author, though his words are revealed to many. This has a certain parallel in the Islamic case wherein God is the author, not only of the Qur'ān but also of previous revelations. Such a situation raises the question: Which of these several revelations has to be regarded as primary? It is interesting to note that this is the point at issue between *pūrva-* and *uttara mīmāṁsā*—two schools which regard the Vedas as authorless! The Islamic case serves to correct the impression that if God is acknowledged as the author of all revelations the question of which revelation is to be regarded as primary would disappear.

[21] Eliot Deutsch and J. A. B. van Buitenen, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

the 'number' —singular or plural— of the recipients of revelation, the Semitic position focuses on the source of the revelation—God, who is always looked upon as one (though he does not necessarily talk of himself or is talked of in the singular). Perhaps this difference in focus arises from the fact that, whereas in Hinduism the sacred scriptures are looked upon as revelations *from* the seers *of* the truth as much as to the seers of the truth, in the Semitic tradition revelation consists of revelation of the truth to the prophets *from* God.

IV

To conclude: if a communal dimension is given to the question of revelation, then, in the Hindu case, this can be applied at two levels— at the level of *obtaining* the results of intuition and at the level of the acceptance of the *results* of intuition. The application of the communal criterion at the first level yields a concept of *śruti* which is less cross-culturally applicable than when the communal criterion is applied only to the results of the intuition.