



Destaque Semanal

Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism refers to the conviction that all Africans and descendants of Africans in the diaspora share a common history, common interests and, ultimately, a common fate which thus(...)

Jihan El-Tahri

Dharma

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Publicado em 2019-04-01

Dharma is a concept pertaining to different Southern Asian religious traditions including Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Hinduism. Within Hinduism, dharma has gained a range of different meanings that broadly identify moral conduct or social and cosmic order. In addition, it is also referred to as being a religion. *Sanātana dharma* is term that is used as being synonymous with Hinduism, even though its meaning refers to universal religion or universal dharma. Dharma defines the orientation of life and its purpose. Historically, it has implied a form of social organisation that guides the spiritual life of the individual as a member of society. It gives a moral orientation towards a 'right life' to achieve happiness and salvation. It is a term that combines ethics and religion and informally regulates inter-personal and social interactions. With different philosophical and religious meanings, dharma may be vaguely translated to mean religion or religious, moral or morality, justice, moral law, duty, virtuous life or virtue and rightful conduct. The ideas of justice, rightness and virtue do not prescribe a superior judge (as God in Judaism, Christianity or Islam) but rather refer to the harmony of the cosmic order. Therefore, dharma as a guide to conduct a moral life is not prescribed by a coded text but rather it prescribes the individual and social conduct of harmonious interaction among different human beings. The concept dates back to the Vedas, sacred texts of the Indo-Aryan period.

Dharma has come to mean three ranges of law or order: 1) an individual spiritual and morally ascetic law, 2) a social regulation mandated by morality, custom and public opinion to achieve the integrity of society, and 3) the order of the universe. Dharma is one of the four objectives to achieve a fulfilling life (the third in terms of importance). The first two represent physical goals, *artha* (wealth or subsistence), and *kama* (desire). The physical goals are not morally bad but they need to be achieved within the limits set by the law of dharma. This

may lead to their enjoyment, the sustainability of the social and cosmic order, and their ascetic renunciation. The ultimate objective is liberation or moksha (*mukti, nirvana, or kaivalya*). Dharma is the moral conduct of life. It is superior to these aforementioned physical objectives and leads to the higher objective of liberation. The concept is multi-dimensional and applies to individual life of different human being as well as to the cycle of death and rebirth. This richness of meanings opens has also led to the controversial social order of the *varna* or class-caste system.

The *varnashrama-dharma* is a system of social organisation. It assigns a natural order to each individual in society for the higher social interest and equilibrium. In this order individual fulfilment is obtained via cosmic fulfilment. The individual dharma is inscribed in the cosmic dharma. In this system, each of the four *varnas*, or caste classes, has a different dharma that defines what the people of the caste should desire and comply with. The higher the caste the more ascetic the desire. The higher caste is the *brahmanas* (priests and intellectuals) followed by the *kshatriyas* (warriors, police, army, and public administrators), the *vaishyas* (merchants, and business people), and lastly the *shudras* (artisans and manual workers). Outside the system are the outcastes, untouchables, *dalit* or *harijan* (cfr. Gandhi). Caste is traditionally assigned by birth and each caste are to be segregated (no intercourse, inter-marriage, joint dinner, etc. between castes) in order to maintain the social order, the unity and the interdependence of humanity. By each caste fulfilling their respective function the wholeness of society complies with the law of dharma.

The *varnashrama-dharma* represents a holistic system of social complexity that sees the wholeness of the community – with the different social functions of the four *varnas* – constituting the body of Brahman, the primordial divine being. From a non-holistic point of view, such as modern individualism, and in the absence of religious justice, this system of social classification primarily represents a form of social discrimination and oppression. The original meaning of the *varnas* foresaw flexibility and passage of a person from one caste to another (cfr. Laws of Manu or the *Manavadharma-Sastra*). Critics of the caste system highlight the fact that the Arya (a historically dominant population) adopted the *varnas* as a colour based social classification towards the indigenous population of India (*varna* means colour in Sanskrit) and consolidated it as a system of social classification by the Brahmins. The caste system has been illegal since the existence of an independent India and the Indian constitution (in force since 1950) but it has persisted as a social custom. Many struggles have been suffered by the untouchables. This group has suffered the highest degree of degrading oppression derived from the caste system. The most active and renowned activists to attack and to fight to abolish untouchability include Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi.

References and further readings:

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Como citar

Gianolla, Cristiano (2019), "Dharma", *Dicionário Alice*. Consultado a 27.05.19, em https://alice.ces.uc.pt/dictionary/?id=23838&pag=23918&id_lingua=1&entry=24256. ISBN: 978-989-8847-08-9

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