CHAPTER 1

Competing Dharmas and Philosophical Traditions

The Buddha’s teaching of the four Truths brought a novel dharma\(^1\) into the culture of his time, a dharma standing antagonistically second to that of the predominant Brahmanical tradition.\(^2\) With its guidelines on how to break free from suffering, it had a definite soteriological orientation\(^3\) based on an ideal of \textit{mokṣa}. The Brahmanical dharma, on the other hand, was concerned with every aspect of life, “the cosmic, ritual and ethical-juridical”.\(^4\) It represented the “complex” or “totality of binding norms”\(^5\) of a communal religion\(^6\) with a ritualistic orientation. Among its prominent features, there is its acknowledgement of the authority of the prescriptions contained in the Vedic \textit{saṃhitā}s, or

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\(^1\) The unitalicized word ‘dharma’ is used throughout here for Sanskrit \textit{dharma} and Pāli \textit{dhamma}, whenever these refer to a set of rules, doctrines, or attitudes in the various ways in which they were intended in premodern India, after the Vedic period. Among the many studies that deal with the ramifications of the concept of dharma up until modern times, I have found Halbfass 1990, chapters 17 and 11, and Gethin 2004 especially useful. The former focuses on the Brahmanical and Hindu traditions, showing in particular how dharma represented the standard that distinguished the Aryan from the \textit{mleccha}; the latter presents an overview of the usage of \textit{dharma/dhamma} in Buddhist literature, and particularly of its plural form in early Buddhism.

\(^2\) See Squarcini 2005a: 453 ff., wherein the author explores the topic of the “bauddhadharma as a challenge to the ‘tradition’”. Timothy Lubin concisely explains the ‘Brahmanical tradition’ as “those forms of religion and social doctrine that were defined by brahmin authorities, generally in Sanskrit and generally represented as derived from and in accordance with the Veda or the pronouncements of the \textit{ṛṣis}” (2005: 78, n. 3).

\(^3\) With regard to ‘soteriology’ in the South Asian cultural context, see for example Gombrich 2006: 26 ff. and Collins 1998: 22 ff.

\(^4\) Horsch 2004: 434. See also Pollock 1990: 322 ff.

\(^5\) Halbfass 1990: 314.

\(^6\) See Gombrich 2006: 26 ff. on the use of the expression ‘communal religion’. Barbara A. Holdrege has adopted ‘embodied community’ to refer to Brahmanical Hinduism and to rabbinic Judaism as well. For, as she writes, “their notions of tradition-identity, in contrast to the universalizing tendencies of missionizing traditions, are embodied in the particularities of ethnic and cultural categories defined in relation to a particular people (Indo-Aryans, Jews), a particular sacred language (Sanskrit, Hebrew), and a particular land (Aryavarta, Israel)” (1999: 33).
śruti, a corpus of revealed texts regarded as independent of an author (apauruṣeya).

The tension between traditions that set themselves up as transmitters of a specific type of dharma has affected various aspects of the history of South Asia, from the socio-political to the intellectual, and has led in particular, over time, to a variety of distinct notions associated with the word dharma. As Patrick Olivelle has observed, the term itself, far from denoting a uniform and constant concept in an “unchanging” India (as the orientalist image had it), “has been subject to deep evolution and change as it was appropriated, challenged, and sometimes even rejected by different groups and traditions.”

Dharma and mokṣa as Subjects of Philosophical Debate

The tension and interplay between competing dharmas triggered an intellectual debate in which the notion of mokṣa (liberation from the cycle of rebirths and, thus, from suffering) eventually became integral to the problematics associated with the notion of dharma. This debate was the background against which important Śūtras and commentaries were redacted or composed anew around the middle of the first millennium of the Christian era. They attest the arising and development of distinct philosophical traditions, in the manner defined by Ben-Ami Scharfstein: individual thinkers, or the group that they represent, subtly articulate a number of specific points, going beyond common reflection as a trait of human activity. They do so by formulating “principles—if only principles of interpretation—and ... conclusions reasonably drawn from them”. Further, they formulate “reasonable arguments—even those that deny reason”—that serve to put one’s own view across to opponents, “and understand and explain how they try to be reasonable.”

Philosophical texts from the middle of the first millennium undergo a primary shift from investigating about the principles of debate to exploring the means of knowledge and logical tools of analysis, and in doing so gradually

7 Concerning the meaning of śruti in relation to smṛti, see Pollock 1990 and 2005, where it is argued that these terms “seem first to have been clearly conceptualized in their relationship to one another” within the Mīmāṃsā tradition (2005: 46).
8 Olivelle 2004: 421.
9 With regard to the dates of the philosophical Śūtras, see Jacobi 1911.