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On Religion and Inter-Religious Dialogue

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Nature of Religion

Among the multiple and variegated manifestations of human consciousness the place and role of religion has been vital and significant having an unmitigated influence on human modes of thinking and ways of living. The expected role of religion in realization of fulfillment in human life and for devotion to a cause that gives our fragile and fugitive existence meaning and value does not require any justification. Religiosity seems to be an intrinsic element in human nature that arises from the experience of imperfection and finitude in human life. The fleeting and evanescent character of our existence gives rise to a feeling that we



are lacking something, we are missing something, and we are always wanting something. Religion seems to come to our help to provide the needed supplementation. It is felt that it can provide the required solace and succor.

It seems that religiosity stems from the mixed feelings of love and respect, wonder and fear, hope and aspiration. It seeks redemption from suffering, receiving of solace and succour and realization of bliss and beatitude. It also craves for grace and mercy from a loving divine who is supposed to listen to the prayers of the devotees and who is supposed to be responsive.

Though religiosity may be alike in all human beings, religions are not one. This is how the oft-repeated saying, "Religions are many but Religion is one" may be understood. Truth is one but its apprehensions may be multiple. Likewise we have a plurality of religions. The ostensive variations among religions arise because the fundamental religious truths are viewed by people in their own ways and adhere to them in different forms and modes. Thus religions may differ both in theoretical tenets and practical creeds. This apart the final ascent to realize the One Absolute may also be unique and personal to each individual human being. The point to be noted is that there is diversity in human understanding of the



Divine and there are different forms of religion like animism, totemism, polytheism, henotheism, deism, monotheism, pantheism, *panentheism*, theism, and the like. In modern times even humanism and Marxism have been branded by some as religion. The word religion has been used both in a strict sense and in a loose sense. This complexity makes it difficult to define religion or to point out its precise nature.

On account of multiplicity of religions and because of the universal presence of and adherence to religiosity at all times and places words like religion, God, faith, worship, devotion, prayer etc. are so very common place with many synonyms and equivalents in different languages, but they are not always used in the same sense. These words are tossed, so to say, carelessly around with all ambiguity in conversations and discussions like the way a beach ball is tossed absentmindedly during a rock concert.

So far as definition of religion is concerned there are many contexts and many approaches on the basis of which religion can be understood and defined. In a phenomenological sense religion is a human recognition of a superhuman or supra-human all-controlling power, personal or impersonal, which may evoke awe,



love and reverence, and which may be approached for help, mercy or grace. Psychologically it is an expression of feelings, emotions, other experiences and complex ideas of human beings in respect of a being who is omniscient, omnipotent and merciful. Sociologically it is a set of beliefs and practices, as also associations and institutions which have evolved during the course of history mostly centering round some gifted individuals, their works, thoughts, lives and practices. In a theological context religion is human being's response to a Divine Being or a multiplicity of divine beings. The nature of response may differ from individual to individual. In the philosophical horizon there is a development in religious ideas and linguistic expressions getting more and more sophisticated and at times confusing, at the societal level religions are becoming more and more organized and institutionalized paradoxically even resulting in splitting up into several sects and sub-sects. No religion is immune to this process of splitting and branching off. Religiosity begins at personal level in individual experiences of course being conditioned by cultural inheritance and in the end again it should culminate in personal experience and realizations but at the intermediate level it is highly



institutionalized and mostly people get entangled in this aspect only.

Ideally speaking religion should stand for a series of logically organized steps in the spiritual journey of a human being to experience and realize the Truth of one's own being and of the total reality. It should be a process of self-realization and self-fulfillment. It should be a means of fullest efflorescence of our potentialities and capabilities in the service of humanity in particular and of the entire cosmos in general. Though in its formulation religion is anthropocentric, in its outcome it should be cosmo-centric. Religion has to sustain the total cosmos.

Need and utility of religion

The need and utility of religion for fragile and fugitive human existence and infirm and shaky social solidarity, individual advancement and social progress require no argumentation or justification. Religion is an intrinsic element in human nature like sociality. Just as human life cannot be conceived without society human existence also cannot have deeper meaning and value without religion. Whatever its form religion has come to stay in the life of man and is exercising, much to our dismay, a pervasive and



dominant influence in our individual and social life. With the rise of science and technology it was felt that they would serve that purpose but there has been disillusionment on that account. In spite of their phenomenal success they could not substitute religion. Whatever be its form religion has come to stay in human life and is exercising, perhaps much to our dismay or dislike, a pervasive and dominant influence not only on sacred and esoteric life but also on the secular and exoteric life. It is unexpectedly affecting the political and economic life of nations. In spite of tremendous rise and success of science and technology there seems to be no alternative between having religion and having no religion. The issue therefore is not religion or no religion but what kind of religion? Is it a religion of love, amity and fraternity or of power, privileges, discord and hatred? A corollary of this is what should be the essential features of religion and what should be the role and function of religion in individual and social life of human being.

The question, "Should religion be relevant to humankind?" may have academic significance but the question, "Is religion relevant to humankind?" has certainly become meaningless because given the present human nature religious adherence of some sort has become



inevitable. There is no alternative therefore between having religion and having no religion. The issue therefore is not 'religion or no religion' but what kind of religion we should have? Is it religion of love and peace and cooperation or of power and hatred and conflict?

Since religion has come to stay in human life but we have to think seriously as to what form of religion should be adhered to. Herein human wisdom becomes pertinent. Like all human enterprises religion has been evolved to serve human needs. It is an undeniable fact that religion is expected to bring about peace and beatitude in individual life and harmony and solidarity in social life. These are the values of religion, and ideally speaking pursuit of religion is precisely for these purposes only. Thus, it is an undeniable fact that religion has great force and it can bring about social change and development in right direction and be a binding factor for social solidarity.

Misuse of Religion

But unfortunately this has also been an incontrovertible fact of history that the humanity has bled and suffered from the malaise of dogmatism, fanaticism, intolerance and exploitation in the name of



religion. Instead of fostering unity, harmony and accord it has played into the hands of vested interests for generating division, discord and disintegration. In the name of religion internecine wars have been fought and even now terrorism is rampant under the same pretext. In the name of religion, again, there have been inter-communal strife and struggles. They are not interreligious, as no one religion can come in conflict with another religion. Likewise there have been inter-sectarian and intra-sectarian conflicts and fights. All these are given religious colouring. They masquerade as religious but they are not religious. Such a situation cannot be conducive to social progress. This, of course, is not to deny the positive role of religion. For example, in the past in Korea Buddhism has been, and was acknowledged by all, as 'Nation Saving Religion' and it contributed to social progress of that country. The point, therefore, is that we have to be vigilant and exercise judicious discrimination between that which is religious and that which not so. Attempts to misuse religion should be exposed and checked. Since religion has great motivating force its misuse can be extremely detrimental to social harmony and social progress.



Proper understanding of religion

We live in the age of science and rationalism and cannot be called upon to accept incredible dogmas and exclusive revelations. Religious tenets and practices that are insensitive to human ills and social crimes cannot appeal to a critical mind. The spirit of science must lead to refinement and purity of religiosity and safeguard it from the perverting influences of vested interests. It must lead to refinement of religion enabling it to respond creatively and constructively to every challenge that humankind faces which science is unable to meet. Science and religion have not to collide and conflict but to supplement and reinforce. It is the binding responsibility of religious leaders as well as of the votaries to respond creatively and selflessly in thwarting evil elements and protecting and projecting the good. Then only religion can restore its lost credibility and bring about confidence regarding its utility. Of course to a credulous mind religion stands for an external institutionalized set of rituals and bunch of beliefs deeply inculcated by mythological stories and clever preachers. But such misconceived religious phenomena cannot be conducive to individual well being and social harmony. In fact every religion



worth the name has to be true, good and beautiful. It has to be beneficial universally. No religion can be bad or harmful. A true adherence to religion must ensue in respect for others' life and others' ways of living. There are alternative pathways to the goals of life and if we are sincere in our intentions and earnest in our efforts we can realize them. This is the essence of Indian culture and this is also the message of all religions of the world. Religious pluralism is the hard fact of our existence and we have to accept it. This acceptance is possible only if there is mutual understanding based on proper study of scriptures of different religions. This alone will entail inter-religious respect and harmony. If we are aware of the basic principles of our own religion as also of others' religions there cannot be conflicts in the name of religions. There is no such thing as religious conflicts in the sense of conflicts among religions. The so-called religious conflicts are conflicts among the misguided votaries of religions. Religions are mutually tolerant but not their misguided votaries. Here comes the role of education. It is not *religious education* that is needed here but *education about religions*. It is unfortunate that majority of the people are not only ignorant about others' religions but they are also ignorant about their own religion. It is this ignorance that is at the root of all



conflicts. It is therefore an imperative need to undertake study of 'comparative religion' at different levels of education highlighting the essential unity among all religions. It will be out of place to discuss here the nature, role, scope, parameters and methodology of comparative religion. Only its need and importance is to be underlined.

Religion for social cohesion

Religion may have transcendental dimension going beyond the ephemeral world but what is to be embarked upon as a stepping stone and a prerequisite is the empirical world. In the empirical world human being lives in a multifaceted social set up. Sociality is built in human existence and human nature. Our social dimension is highly complex, complicated and subtle network of relations. Society provides the ground and sustenance for human existence and also for the basic structure and materials for human evolution. The lowest unit of society is family which may be joint or single but the former has been the traditional form and it has served very useful purpose for smooth and happy life in a corporate spirit of mutual care and share. It is a mode of coexistence in



interdependence and interrelation, a supportive mutualism with a spirit of selfsameness. In this corporate living the roles of grandparents, parents, children and grand children are well defined by socio-cultural norms. In this context the role of tradition is significant. A live tradition is deeply embedded in the past, well-footed in the present and envisioning the future. It is the accumulative process of transmitting, adjusting and applying the norms and values cherished in a culture. It admits of creative freedom and innovative changes. Religion if properly conceived and pursued has to safeguard this sociality.

Religious pluralism and secularism in India

Religious pluralism and secularism in the sense of equal respect for all religions and their mutual tolerance are engrained in the predominantly spiritualistic Indian culture ever since the Vedic times. India is like a many splendoured mosaic of different religions, cultures and beliefs. The fact that different religious communities are all her integral parts is both a strength and glory. It is for us to make this diversity a source of unity rather than a factor for divisiveness. India is well known for her age-old catholicity of outlook and broadness of vision. The seers and sages



have always preached cultural symbiosis and integration of diversities either in declaring multidimensional nature of reality or in emphasizing that the same truth can be expressed in diverse ways. Mutuality and complementarity of all existences and hence their organic coexistence has been the keynote of Indian thought. Our religious and other literature is replete with such ideas and this is too evident to state.

The fountainheads of Indian culture and heritage have been the Vedas and Vedic literature. The fact that they are now associated with Hindu religion as it is professed and practiced today should not make one to doubt their universal significance and meaning, and universal appeal. They are the heritage of the whole humanity for all times. It would be pertinent to quote Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru who in his convocation address to Aligarh Muslim University on January 24, 1948, very perceptively said, "I am proud of India, not only because it has capacity to add to it by keeping the doors and windows of her mind and spirit open to fresh and invigorating winds from distant lands. I have said that I am proud of our inheritance and our ancestors who gave an intellectual and cultural pre-eminence to India. How do you feel alien to it and pass it



without understanding it or feeling strange thrill which comes from the realization that we are the inheritors of this vast treasure?"

Ever since the Vedic times religion as part of dharma has played a decisive role in the history of India. The exceedingly deep religious sentiments of Indians and their unflagging commitments to their respective faiths cannot be denied or wiped out. It is a hard fact and we have to recognize it. In situation of religious pluralism secularism has been the ideal and in cases of communal conflicts secularism alone has been put forth as a mode of conflict resolution. The history of Indian culture is full of evidences testifying propagation and practice of secularism as a mode of peaceful co-existence. Right from the Vedic exhortation of "Ekam Sat viprah bahudha vadanti", Bhagavadgita's declaration of "Yo yo yam yam tanum bhakta shraddhayarcitumicchati, Tasya tasyacalam shraddham tameva vidadhamyaham, and Mahimnastotra's message of "Rucinam vaicitryadrajukutilanana pathajusam, nranamekogamyastvamasi payasamarjaya iva." and a host of such other averments up to modern times this ideal has echoed on the Indian horizon. No doubt secularism is a word of western origin but we are using it in our own sense and in our own context as equality and equanimity of state in its approach towards different religions. So in Indian



context it has a definite meaning and a fixed connotation which is different from its original western negative sense of separation of power between state and church. It stands on the contrary for religious equality and liberty with certain equidistance of state in its dealings with different religions. So, Indian secularism is not anti-thesis of religious devoutness. Secularism, thus, cannot and does not mean that people of India should forget their religious heritage which is so very rich and diverse.

Religion is not only deeply rooted in the Indian psyche, India is essentially multi-religious. She has the unique privilege of being the home of majority of religions of the world. Religious pluralism is the keynote of Indian culture and religious tolerance is the bedrock of Indian spirituality. It is based on the belief that all religions are equally good and efficacious pathways to perfection or God-realization. It stands for a complex interpretative process in which there is an adherence to one's own religion, a transcendence of religion and yet there is a unification of multiple religions. It is a bridge between religions in a multi- religious society to cross over the barriers of their diversity. It is something of which there is no parallel in the west.



Religious tolerance, which is the essence of Indian secularism, presupposes mutual understanding. This mutual understanding is possible if we are aware of the basic principles of our religion as well as religions of others. Here comes the role of education, not religious education but education about fundamentals of all religions. It is an unfortunate situation that many people are not only not knowledgeable about other's religions; they are also ignorant of one's own religion. It is this ignorance that is at the root of all conflicts. It is therefore an imperative need to undertake study of 'comparative religion' at different levels of education highlighting the essential unity among all religions. It will be out of place to discuss here the nature, role, scope, parameters and methodology of comparative religion. Only its need and importance is to be underlined. Religious pluralism is the hard fact of our existence and we have to accept it. This acceptance is possible only if there is mutual understanding based on proper study of scriptures of different religions. This alone will entail inter-religious respect and harmony. If we are aware of the basic principles of our own religion as also of others' religions there cannot be conflicts in the name of religions. There is no such thing as religious conflicts in the sense of conflicts among religions. The



so-called religious conflicts are conflicts among the misguided votaries of religions. Religions are mutually tolerant but not their misguided votaries.

Conclusion

It needs to be emphasized that secularism in its positive sense is the corner stone of an egalitarian and forward looking society which our constitution purports to establish. If secularism flourishes in India it is not because it is a chosen political creed of a few articulate individuals, but because it is a living tissue in the body of Indian culture drawing nourishment from the best of our ideas and ideals, beliefs and practices. In a religiously pluralistic society like ours secularism is the only mode of thinking and living best suited to us. It consists in treating all religions alike and in assigning them their due place with sufficient regulations to check their undue interference in social, political and economic life of the country. It also calls for a constant reinterpretation and renewal within religion so as to promote compatibility and complementarity between religious conceptions and prescriptions and socio-political and economic progress.



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