

Religious Fundamentalism and Fundamental Unity of Religions

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ABSTRACT

The study of man can never be complete unless it includes the study of religion, for there is no more widespread, impressive, or significant thing in his history than religion. Whoever takes a comprehensive survey of human experience soon discovers that religion has from the earliest times and throughout the ages occupied a central place in life and history. However crude religion may have been in origin, and however gross the superstitions with which it has often been associated, its omnipresence and centrality in the history of the race are facts to be reckoned with. When the cultural and intellectual attainments are low, religion is crude; when the cultural background is more substantial and extensive, the religious ideas will be more expansive and the plane of thought higher. Finally, the mind must win over the body. True ideology must score over false ideologies.

Key word- Religion, Culture.

Being a Human being we should have full trust in humanity to honour other religions and cultures. It gives the right to survive honourably to all religions and cultures by recognizing their separate identity and the right to maintain it. In the same world we have been living together over centuries like good neighbours. All religious communities were very much tolerant of the sister communities. They maintained not only economic, but social relations with each other. They used to celebrate the cultural and religious rituals of different religions with friendly zeal and cooperation. Even they had settled their differences on religious bases overriding extremism. The differences at the political level were not observed at social level, especially

in rural areas where life depended on the mutual inter dependence. Actually the co-existence was based on the acceptance and realisation of the otherness of others and their cultural and religious heritage. When and wherever this realisation of otherness was ignored the problems emerged and disturbed the peace and tranquillity of the multi-cultural society.

State and religion being the two most durable of human institutions, have symbolized authority, power and stability. There is censorious impulse, wield power through political, religious, cultural and literary institutions.

Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) established his epoch-making thesis on earth revolving around

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the sun in his study *Dialogo Sapri du Maisimi sistemi del Mondo* (1632). Hell broke loose around him immediately. He was charged with heresy and breach of good faith and his “Dialogo” was banned by Pope Paul in 1633. The book was incorporated into the notorious index of prohibited books maintained by the Catholic church since 1559. The sanction had the force of the canon law prohibiting the faithful from accessing such literature.

The venerable old man of 70 was compelled to kneel, to be clothed in sack-cloth, and to deny that what he knew to be true. He promised, he would never again in words or writings spread this damnable heresy. Galileo was not to be cowed down. He mumbled the following famous words, as he rise from his knees: Never the less it does move.

Galileo was obligated as his religious punishment to recite the seven penitential psalms once a week for three years. He was to make another historic statement by asserting, Holy writ was intended to teach men how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go.

The phrase ‘religious fundamentalism’ was employed in the United States in 1920s to describe fundamentalist and evangelical churches—a mixed bag of theologically conservative protestant church which had emerged in response to Charles Darwin’s, *The Origin of Species*. For them, final authority resided in the word of God. The later day protestants took over from the Roman Catholics minus the legacy of papal sanction.

Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasreen, Maqbool Fida Husain are cojointly victims of religious hooliganism dictating terms to the civic society.

Wendy Doniger, author of the *Hindus: An*

Alternative History which was withdrawn from publication last year (2014) on why neither egg-lobbing nor bans can deter her from her scholarly work. Hindu Sena-Activists protested against Doniger’s book during Delhi World Book Fair (2014). Complex psychological and historical factors have bred in certain contemporary Hindus a sense of shame for the eroticism of their own religion. It has also robbed them of their sense of humour.

Salman Rushdie said “if freedom of expression does not exist, then all other freedoms begin to die”. He also hinted, “I think we are in a dangerous position now in India where we accept censorship by very small numbers of violent people. Two things from the bedrock of any open society ... freedom of expression and rule of law. If you don’t have those things you don’t have a free society.”

In India the issue of religious conversions has taken centre stage with emotions running high. Christians argue that had their efforts at harvesting souls through conversions been strong and widespread, they would not be just 2.3% of the population. Muslims claim they do not indulge in organized conversion efforts and the growth in their proportion of the Indian population, from under 10% in 1951 to nearly 14% has been through higher birth rate. Hindus, reduced in proportion from over 84% in 1951 to 80%, state that their non-proselytizing culture works to their disadvantage, so they have every right to ‘ghar- wapsi’ programmes. Perhaps it’s time to dump the emotions and take a rational look at the issue. In all honesty, while there may be materials gains from religious conversion, spiritually, it is almost always negative. Why? Because true spiritual growth happens with

internal focus when you attempt to see truth within yourself, not when you try to prove the “other religion” as false. But this is a complex topic, one that has been explored by the spiritually adept for millennia.

II

Religion has been defined from the aspects of cognition, affection and conation. According to G. Galloway ‘Religion’ is man’s faith in a power beyond himself whereby he seeks to satisfy emotional needs and gain stability in life, and which he expresses in acts of worship and service: Religion involves thought and activity as well as beliefs and values. Religion has manifested it self in a baffling variety of forms, including much that is crude, futile and ignoble, as well as much that is noble, idealistic and conducive to human wellbeing.

‘According to socio-biology, in prehistory, religion served an evolutionary end. The more cohesive a factor religion was in bonding a clan together, and making it better equipped to overcome competing claims in the struggle for survival, the more effective it became as an evolutionary tool.

From the outset, religions were genetically programmed to vie with each in fierce, often lethally violent, competition. ‘Stronger’ religions-which not only had a comparatively larger number of followers, but whose adherents were more committed to their common faith system and therefore to each other-prevalled over ‘weaker’ religion which lacked both numbers and unswerving singleness of belief.

Fanaticism, unquestioning and unquestionable dogma, became the adrenaline, the testosterone, of religion; violence, latent or manifest, lay at the

heart of all religious creeds.

Spiritual masters like Buddha and Mahavira, Jesus and Muhammad and Guru Nanak – evolutionary mutants who saw thought the illusory divisiveness of religions barriers to the undifferentiated unity of the human spirit preached a gospel of oneness. But their followers subverted their teachings to foster separateness and strife, from the crusades, to the civil war in Buddhist Sri Lanka, to Khalistani terrorism, to the rise of the IS and the killing of rationalists in India and Bangladesh by Hindu and Islamist fanatics.

From being an aid to human evolution, religion has become one of the most serious threats to civilisation, a construct based not just on the airy fairy ideal of a common humanity but on the literally down-to-Earth reality that all of us share a common planet equally endangered by environmental despoliation and religio-political jingoism.

All institutions, as products of the past, tend to develop inflexibility in their functioning and fail to keep abreast of the changing needs of the times. These tendencies seem to be greater in organised religion than in most other fields. Since the major concern of religion is with the unknown and mysterious, and since religious doctrines rest upon belief and faith, it is strongly authoritarian, and even infallible, in character. Novel ideas are therefore, discouraged and looked upon with suspicion by religious organisations. In the words of Maciver: “Revelation stands in the way of revaluation.” The solution of this problem lies in re-assessment, re-valuation and reconstruction. In the words of Hartzler: To conceive of a non-institutionalised religion is sociologically infantile. The big task is institutional reconstruction. Since

religious agencies of all kinds are made by man, they must be and can be continually remade. If men are to meet their spiritual needs in an ever more rapidly changing world, religion must be re-defined, clarified, reorganised, and subjected to much thoughtful experimentation.

III

Religions have played a central role in the mutual understanding and co-existence between different nations through its history.

In Hindu religious epic, and the Vedas, the word “Om Shanti” was used as the expression of both the desire and prayer for peace.

In Islam, the word “Bismillah” expresses the desire and practice of peace.

Jainism is a version of Hindu religion, which, in its doctrine, accepted the “Ahinsa” or Non-violence, as its essence.

Buddha was the first philosopher of the world to preach the principle and practice of equitable equality among the people, which means that all the people are equal and equity is their behavioural basis. Buddha had always been against any type of strata and structural violence.

Jesus Christ asserted that “Blessed are the peace-makers”, and “love your enemies.” Jesus said to his disciples, as such: Peace / live with you, my peace I give to you.

The Greek concept of “irene” means the combination of harmony, Justice and peace.

In Judaism the word – ‘Shalom’ denotes wholeness, completeness, harmony, peace of heart and mind. Peace is inherent to the order of creation it self.

It shall be doing injustice to the institution of religion to equate it with religious fundamentalism.

One needs to be reminded of the fundamental categories of thought, and consequently of science, being of religious origin.

Unfortunately religion has come to be identified with religious fundamentalism in the popular mind. Religious fundamentalism appeals to the scripture in the literal sense. It identifies itself by its aggressive assertion of self-superiority, emphasis on adherence to ritualistic norms and by involuntarily crossing into the province of secular affairs of individuals and collectivises. Who would care to listen to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi when he insisted, I decline to be bound by any interpretation (of the scriptures) however learned it might be if it is repugnant to reason and moral sense.

The ancient Indian saying of “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*” (the whole world is a family), still holds good against the idea of conflict on the basis of differences in colour, culture, language or religion. Truly the whole world is now a small village with the technological revolution. Globalisation has brought people closer as never before, we have both bitterness and good memories in our historical past. We ought to ignore the dark aspects of our past for the betterment of our present and future. No religion advocates violence, so the followers of all religions ought to ponder over the contentious issues, which are detrimental to humanity and peace. All over the world, the basic human values are the same.

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