

## RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

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### **Abstract**

Every religion has been under stress for some time, hard pressed by secular ideologies, which were first set in motion by the thinkers of the Enlightenment. Then came the fall of the *Twin Towers*. Unexpected disasters like that stir the religious instinct that seems to have gone dead in many contexts. The fact is that religion still moves millions. The present tragedy, however, is its instrumentalization for political purposes, often linked with violence. Hence, criticism purifies religion, and helps to make it more relevant, meaningful and socially committed. We cannot deny that religions have helped people of diverse cultures to come together in common loyalty. In the same way genuine religion should bring together people of different competences and convictions, both religious and secular. Differences can be transcended when partners really wish to help, complement and enrich each other. What has made a relaxed conversation between religions difficult in today's world is that they have become greatly politicized. And yet, we belong to a world of continuous exchange of ideas and

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ideals; neither Hindus nor Muslims nor Christians need to feel embarrassed about their indebtedness to the other. A collective sense of responsibility must be roused in the followers of all faiths to address the shared anxieties of the day. The consequent cross-fertilization of ideas, convictions and disciplines will enrich every sector of humanity in view of a shared future.

**Keywords:** Christianity, Dialogue, Fundamentalism, Hinduism, India, Islam, Mission, Politicisation, Religion, Religious Harmony, Secularisation, Spirituality

## **Introduction**

While all religions are under stress due to pressure from the forces of secularization, what we notice today is a revival of all religions. As major religions brought people of diverse cultures together, a deeper understanding of religion itself should bring people of diverse competences and convictions together. Their interdependence should be recognized in order to address unitedly the more pressing problems of the day.

## **All Religions under Pressure from Forces of Secularisation**

Every religion has been under stress for some time, especially in the western world, *hard pressed* by secular ideologies, which were first set in motion by the thinkers of the Enlightenment. Historians say that it rose up as a spontaneous reaction to the “Wars of Religion,” considering religion as a divisive force. This resistance to excessive religious influence over secular matters picked up momentum gradually; but then it went into exaggerations on the other side.

Ludwig Feuerbach taught that God was merely a *human projection*. For Marx religion was the opium of the people, for Sigmund Freud a psychological illusion; of late, for Richard Dawkins a delusion, a cause of conflict. Many, like Nietzsche, announced the death of religion within a few generations.<sup>1</sup> This conviction was growing even stronger in our days, producing militant evangelists of atheism like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.

## **Aggressive Self-Expression of Religion**

Then came the fall of the *Twin Towers*. This unexpected disaster stirred the religious instinct that had gone dead in the West for a long time. Jurgen Habermas, an eloquent spokesperson for secular thinking in Germany admitted, “The secular society acquires a new

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<sup>1</sup>Steve Bruce, *Secularization*, London: Oxford University Press, 2011, 182.

understanding of religious convictions..." Hans Küng said, "Islam has performed a special service in bringing about a new global awareness of the religious dimension..."<sup>2</sup> Nemoianu mentions persons like Norberto Bobbio, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas who had similar perceptions.<sup>3</sup> Habermas frankly admits that one may need the aid of religion to provide motivation for the observance of healthy social norms, and an understanding of the concepts of good and evil.<sup>4</sup>

Yes, religion is *not dead*. It is alive. It still moves millions. "Almost everywhere you look, from the suburbs of Dallas to the slums of Sao Paulo to the back streets of Bradford, you can see religion returning to public life."<sup>5</sup> Ardent religious believers are alive and active from Sudan to the Philippines, Myanmar to Minnesota; from China, Turkey and Russia to New Zealand, Sri Lanka and India.

Unfortunately, what has drawn wide attention of late has been a misunderstanding of religion, or its *instrumentalization* for political purposes or for violence. Christopher Hitchens makes a list of such cases: Ayatollah's fatwa against Salman Rushdie,<sup>6</sup> the Taliban destruction of twin Buddhas,<sup>7</sup> belief in Karma and Kismet,<sup>8</sup> the Hutu-Tutsi clash,<sup>9</sup> the Crusades, persecution of Jews;<sup>10</sup> violence in Belfast, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem, Baghdad; anti-Muslim violence in Serbia.<sup>11</sup>

### Religion as a Force for Good

What are forgotten meantime are personalities like John Paul II breathing the spirit of freedom into the Soviet bloc with earth-shaking consequences, Mother Teresa bringing life and care to hundreds of thousands of abandoned poor the world over, Rani Maria who died for justice to the downtrodden.

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<sup>2</sup>Hans Küng, *Islam*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007, 539.

<sup>3</sup>Gedeminas Jankunas, *Dictatorship of Relativism*, Society of St. Paul, New York, 2011, 318.

<sup>4</sup>Jankunas, *Dictatorship of Relativism*, 184-185.

<sup>5</sup>John Micklethwait & Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back*, London: Allen Lane, 2009, 13.

<sup>6</sup>Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great*, New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007, 28.

<sup>7</sup>Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 31.

<sup>8</sup>Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 59.

<sup>9</sup>Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 191.

<sup>10</sup>Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 16.

<sup>11</sup>Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 18.

In the above evaluation, not even the minimum of recognition is given to hundreds of thousands of religious workers serving the humblest communities in the remotest villages, amidst natural disasters, violence, and tragedies of every kind; nor to billions of *humble believers* of every faith, who, tapping the resource of their religious faith bring meaning and purpose to their lives, and offer love, kindness, forgiveness, and service to each other.

### **Criticism has Purified Religion**

Reflecting realistically, criticism has not been a denial of the value of religion itself, but a protest against the manner in which the critics have seen it lived, misused, manipulated; and against the persons who represent religion in their contexts. In fact, criticism has purified religion, whether it was from the Reformers, Enlightenment thinkers, Marxists, neutral social observers, or even persecutors. A more *relevant, meaningful* and socially committed form of religious faith has emerged. Therefore, the believers' response to a negative evaluation of religion should not be one of aggressive confrontation, but an effort to take it as an occasion to set right what is inauthentic in their personal lives and in the lives of their communities.

Sincere believers have not always been successful in persuading the radicals to change, especially when the persons concerned are excessively *emotion-led*, and the anger they cultivate is mixed up, as in the Middle East, with other local grievances (economic, cultural, ethnic, political) which they express in religious terms.

### **Religious Traditions have Brought Diverse People Together**

Ratzinger thought that Christianity had more in common with the *ancient cultures* of humankind (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Confucianism, ancient Christianity, pietistic Islam) than with the relativistic and rationalistic world of Enlightenment that has cut itself loose from the fundamental insights of all of humankind.<sup>12</sup> However, differences do exist.

Clash of ideas is nothing new in human history. It is a matter of daily experience that people think differently; they *discuss, debate*, and agree to differ. But they learn from each other in the process. Both are enriched. People of different cultures differ, further, in categories of thought, manner of expressing themselves, and styles of relating. Those of different civilizations differ in more respects.

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<sup>12</sup>Jankunas, *Dictatorship of Relativism*, 155.

However, religions have helped people of diverse cultures to come together in common loyalty. If trade and commerce brought different civilizations to interact with each other and benefit economically, religious movements have contributed even more towards the *emotional integration* of diverse races and civilizations and collaborative effort at a deeper level. Hans Küng says that Islam brought together the Berbers, Arabs, East Africans, Turks, Bosnians, Albanians, Persians, Indians, Malays, and the Chinese.<sup>13</sup> Christianity reached out even to a greater diversity of peoples. Buddhism holds together the nations of East Asia under its influence. The message of Hinduism has not only integrated the hearts of the millions south of the Himalayas, but has inspired similar numbers beyond the seas.

### **Mutual Penetration of Ideas in Ancient India**

Natural as differences are, they can be transcended when partners wish to enrich each other. Let me take an instance from India's ancient history. The area that today we call Bharata Varsha was not a homogeneous whole in Vedic times. According to Patanjali (2<sup>nd</sup> Cent. BC) *Aryavarta* was confined to the Doab, reaching in the east to the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna. East of that point in today's UP and Bihar, there flourished another civilization, that of '*Greater Magadha*' of Mongoloids, Austroasiatics, and other earlier Indians.

Johannes Bronkhorst says, that was the area where *Buddha and Mahavira* lived and worked. He makes it extremely clear that this was a non-Vedic society, non-Brahminic India. Buddhism and Jainism arose not as a revolt against the Brahminic order where it held sway; it was a resistance to the expansion of that order as it threatened to spread eastwards. Here is an early example of a "clash of civilizations."

In fact, Satapatha Brahmana (13.8.1.5), a Brahminic record, speaks about the '*demonic people of the East*,' who made their sepulchral mounds round,<sup>14</sup> not four-cornered like the Aryans. Later, these mounds would develop into Buddhist stupas. Mahabharata (3.188.64) refers to such stupa-like constructions, associating them with "godlessness and social disorder."<sup>15</sup> An Atharvaveda prayer (5.22.14) wishes fever to move away to the land of the Angas and Magadhas. Magadhans were ridiculed for their inability to pronounce 'r,' changing it in to 'l'. Many Mongoloid races even today have similar difficulties.

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<sup>13</sup>Küng, *Islam*, xxvi.

<sup>14</sup>Johannes Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2013, 4-6.

<sup>15</sup>Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha*, 5.

Oldenberg thinks that the Magadhans were disliked by the Aryans for no other reason than that they were not yet Brahminized, Aryanised. It is very important to remember, therefore, that Buddhism, Jainism, and the Maurya empire, rose in a *pre-Brahminic India*.<sup>16</sup> The relationship between the people of Aryavarta and those of Magadha was, to say the least, hostile. Their concepts of life too differed.

The Magadhans differed in ideas among themselves too. The *Jainas* glorified withdrawal and abstention from activity.<sup>17</sup> *Ajivikas* sometimes took these ideas to the extreme. *Buddhists* differed from both; they affirmed what mattered was to regulate the driving force behind action.<sup>18</sup> These diverse persuasions were often locked in endless debates.

Centuries passed. The Aryans conquered far and wide. But the Magadhan concepts lived on. We see the following Jaina insight implanted into the *Bhagavad Gita* 18.3 centuries later, “some wise men say that all activity is to be abandoned as evil,”<sup>19</sup> and the Buddhist one at 3.4-7 about ‘detached’ action (*nishkama karma*), and at 18.11 “restraining one’s mind.”<sup>20</sup> Johannes Bronkhorst points out how *Gita* had integrated various streams of thought. They had become part of a common heritage. Thus, concepts that seem to collide at one stage may converge at another.

### **Mutual Enrichment Is Possible Even Today**

The Christian contribution to the development of Indian political thought that led to India’s Independence and *modernization* is generally recognised.<sup>21</sup> It is true, some missionary criticism was over-harsh, which was greatly resented by Vivekananda and Gandhi. But it made the Indian elite to become self-critical. Christian-inspired *value system* as presented in western education, respected social codes even if not always practiced by the ruling class that proposed them, and the noble ideals that Christian society cherished, did make an impact over a period of time. A series of *reforms* were set in motion.

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<sup>16</sup>Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha*, 8-9.

<sup>17</sup>Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha*, 22.

<sup>18</sup>Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha*, 52.

<sup>19</sup>Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha*, 25.

<sup>20</sup>Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha*, 29.

<sup>21</sup>Dominic Emmanuel et al., *The Other Side, Redefining Bharat*, Vitasta Publishing, Delhi, 2012, 23-25.

Raja Rammohun Roy demanded the abolition of *Sati*, pressure mounted against *child marriage*, Jotirao Phule highlighted the hardships of the lower castes, Brahma Samaj presented Hinduism as a monotheistic religion, Keshub Chandra Sen helped his fellow-countrymen to interiorize many Christian values as though they were indigenous.<sup>22</sup> Vivekananda started the Rama Krishna Mission, imitating the Christian missionaries. Aurobindo set himself at Pondicherry to re-interpret the entire Hindu heritage. In short, we would not have had the contributions of any of these great men, nor of Tilak, Gokhale, Gandhi, Nehru, or Ambedkar, if Christian ideas from missionaries themselves or from secular interpreters of the Christian message had not influenced them in one manner or the other.

### **Indians have been Takers as well as Givers**

Nor was the influence only in one direction. The Vedic thought won respectful attention in the West. The Germanic societies claimed proud relationship with the *Indo-Aryan heritage*. The Gita won wide acclaim in Western intellectual circles. The concept of Ahimsa found universal acceptance. Yoga practitioners multiplied worldwide. Hindu gurus and godmen made their way to many western countries and won admirers or followers.

In earlier centuries, *Indian thought* had found welcome in the Chinese courts and among Southeast Asian communities. Epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana became part of the heritage of many SE nations, even among people who remained faithful to Buddhism like in Thailand and Cambodia, or accepted Islam like in Malaysia and Indonesia. This was in keeping with the Indian tradition of mutual borrowing. For example, Sankaracharya drew abundantly from Buddhism, including the monastic tradition. Jainism became greatly Hinduised as centuries passed. Buddhists among the sub-Himalayan communities have adopted many Hindu beliefs and practices.

Asoka stands unique in history as a monarch who sent out the greatest number of teams on a mission of *religious persuasion*. The word 'conversion' has a negative connotation in our country. But no other activity south of the Himalayas developed as much intensity and depth as religious persuasion. And this effort for mutual spiritual sharing was not limited to religious circles alone. The Mahabharata makes it abundantly clear that India's secular society

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<sup>22</sup>Koenraad Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, Rupa & Co., New Delhi, 2001, 103.

was equally inclined to debate religious principles and moral values in every life-context: in royal courts, family discussions, even on the battlefield as we see in Bhagavad Gita.

### **Politicisation of Religion, Radicalisation**

What has made a relaxed conversation between religions difficult in today's world is that they have become greatly politicized. Even people like Trump, Orban and Erdogan play on people's *religious sentiments* to get elected and get their controversial programmes approved. In the Middle East and North Africa, several political leaders have used religion to keep themselves in power.

One exaggeration leads to another. To begin with, it was *radical secularisation* trends that stirred radical religious self-assertion. When representatives of secular ideologies began humiliating religious believers, insulting religious leaders, and desecrating religious symbols, a reaction was bound to come. Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, the Danish cartoons against Prophet Muhammad, the burning of the *Koran*, the placing of Hindu deities on beer bottles and pesticides, the disgracing of Jesus image... such things have unfortunately provoked a violent response.

As religion is a highly *motivating force*, when it takes the wrong direction the consequences can be disastrous. Political leaders and ambitious upstarts seem to be more conscious of this fact than religious leaders themselves. Whenever they wanted a deadly work done, they knew that religion was an under-used energy to be tapped. So we find secular-minded Americans using Islamic religious fervour against the atheistic Soviets in Afghanistan; non-believing Israeli leaders giving a Biblical foundation to their territorial claims; secularized leaders in the Arab world putting their followers against their rivals invoking religion; L.K. Advani stirring up religious emotions in illiterate masses to wrest political power when he saw other avenues closed.

But, in the process, religious leaders have nearly lost control over believers, especially over those who have turned radical. Their influence in public life had already been declining with increased secularisation and growing distrust of established authority. With this general aversion to the Establishment, both religious and secular, *mob-mobilizers* holding radical views with an emotional content began to win support in an unforeseeable manner. They used religion as a uniting and motivating force, and exploited it to the full, often combining it with *ultra-nationalism*. This is what gave the impression to neutral observers that religion was a negative force. Favour-



seekers crowd around these newly emerging mavericks who appeared to be real go-getters.

### **A Majoritarian Social Order**

Western intellectuals meant well when they urged democracy in West Asia or North Africa. But the first thing those newly created democracies did was to set up a majoritarian social order, with religious exaggerations. The minorities went on the defensive even for their very existence. Religious fanaticism and *fascist nationalism* made a fatal combination. The minorities saw a bleak future; many migrated. India had escaped such distortions of democracy as long as the Gandhi-Nehru heritage lasted. Today we are in a situation that calls for deeper reflection.

The economic *crisis of 2009* aroused majoritarianism in the western world too. For a long period of time, globalizers, cosmopolitans and liberals had been holding sway in international debates. Western capital confidently moved worldwide, as profits accumulated in the West. Meanwhile their aging population demanded immigrant labour to keep the local economy going. All seemed to proceed well for a while until the economic crisis revealed a painful picture. *Cheap labour* from Asia, Africa and Latin America was taking away jobs from the indigenous population. What is not said is that humbler works had become unwelcome even to the indigent indigenes.

The painful reality was that while the economy required immigration, the *defenders of identity*, culture and heritage began to see a threat in it to their collective future. Today, liberals that used to speak up for minorities, migrants and marginals have gone on the defensive. Majoritarianism seems to be gaining ground worldwide, not rarely seeking a religious justification.

### **The Indian Situation**

Inter-religious situation in India today is not at its best. No analysis is perfect, hardly any unbiased. In the following study, I will be referring Koenraad Elst, who is known to be a strong Hindu-sympathizer. He draws our attention to the historical fact that for nearly a millennium Hindu society *felt humiliated* through the political, ideological, and psychological domination of Muslim and European powers.<sup>23</sup> He sees in it a *psycho-social justification* for the emotional display of majoritarian pride. He argues, all that educated Indians long for is to see their country emerging strong in the modern

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<sup>23</sup>Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 9.

world without losing their cultural rootedness.<sup>24</sup> This is certainly a legitimate ambition for which minority communities also can collaborate.

The greatest obstacle that Elst notices is what he calls a *self-alienation* that a section of the majority community suffers from which leads to self-hatred and an inferiority complex.<sup>25</sup> This leads again to other negative attitudes: aggressive self-defence and accusations against Muslims of being disloyal to the country or against Christians of making conversion. Some cling to marginal values, peripheral issues, or practices verging on superstitions, thus trivializing their great heritage.

The *legitimate pride* in Hindu hearts needs to be laid on firmer foundations. A civilization that resisted Islamic rule for seven centuries whilst those of Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt, Persia and Byzantium disappeared altogether, needs to fear neither the pressures of other religious traditions nor the inroads of modernity.

### **The Building up and Widening of the Common Ground**

History proves that while 'Conflicts of Civilizations' have been many, *areas of consensus* have been even more. Neutral observers have noticed that all believing communities have always borrowed from the secular wisdom prevalent in their own societies and have been stimulated by religious insights of their neighbours. The Jews integrated the social norms and spiritual wisdom of Middle East societies into their religious heritage on a selective basis. Early Christian community did the same with the Hellenic patrimony, and later with Celtic and Germanic cultural traditions and symbolisms. Islamic architecture followed the Byzantine lines, as Solomon's temple had profited from Phoenician workmanship. As Indian numerals were accepted by the West as Arabic numerals, Greek philosophy and classical texts were welcomed by western intellectuals from Arab and Jewish scholars. Christian theologians, including Thomas Aquinas, used these imported concepts to explain Christian dogma.

There is no cause for embarrassment then that *Indians borrowed* from others, as *they shared* their heritage with generosity. Thus, we find that the Brahmo Samajists had accepted Jesus as an ethical teacher and genuine spiritual leader. This openness influenced later thinkers like Vivekananda and Tagore. Most educated Hindus have

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<sup>24</sup>Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 6-7.

<sup>25</sup>Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 237.

followed the same line of thought. As Hindu reformers once borrowed from Buddhism and drew from the strength of the Bhakti movement, their descendants today show themselves capable of re-interpreting Marx,<sup>26</sup> Darwin, Freud, Carl Jung and Adam Smith to fit their ideas with native concepts.

Nor have the learnings been only in one direction. Environmentalists quote abundantly from Indian classics and people in search of alternative spiritual experiences crowd Hindu ashrams at home and abroad. Society has always been in search of a Common Ground.

### The Present Day Hitches

So, in this world of *continuous exchange* of ideas and ideals, neither Hindus nor Muslims nor Christians need to feel embarrassed about their indebtedness to the other. The universe is a mutually dependent whole, all living beings are interlinked, humanity is held together in a network of relationships. We cannot renounce this shared heritage. In this context to feel humiliated for having learned from others is unnecessary self-imposed punishment. It is not humbling to be reminded by Elst that all pioneers of Hindu revivalism were West-influenced intellectuals, not excluding Savarkar and Gowalkar.<sup>27</sup>

The reason for much Hindutva anxiety is the fact that 'mediocre minds' control the movement. Koenraad Elst says that the Sangh Parivar is known for its *intellectual poverty*, with too little evidence of a genuinely critical think-tank.<sup>28</sup> Their pitiable attempts to rewrite Indian history with hopelessly inferior material, combined with clear bias and one-sidedness only go to damage their own image.<sup>29</sup> Of late they have shown that their supporters are capable of violence too.

The direction of the Hindu movements today is very much *in RSS hands*, which started as a cultural organization and a self-defence group during communal troubles. Its originators wanted to instil patriotism, insist on character building, and humanitarian service. Hedgewar brought organization into the movement.<sup>30</sup> He was a man of action, not a thinker or writer, a weakness that has clung to the organization ever since. However, credit must be

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<sup>26</sup>Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 10.

<sup>27</sup>Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 471.

<sup>28</sup>Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 225-226.

<sup>29</sup>Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 137.

<sup>30</sup>Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 144-145.

given to the Sangh Parivar for its committed service at the grass-roots level involving several millions of activists, for establishing an impressive presence among the common people.<sup>31</sup> Today's Ruling Party has been led to power only through their painstaking efforts.

### **A Return to Mutual Esteem Is Possible**

It is difficult to initiate a dialogue on religious matters with persons for whom religion is merely a political tool or instrument of power. *Religion must be rescued* from their hands by people for whom religion is a search for ultimate realities, abiding values, and a commitment to the collective welfare of humanity. *Sanatana Dharma* cannot be reduced to cow protection any more than patriotism can be reduced to standing at attention at *Vandemataram*. Those who do so are doing injustice to the core religious ideals of their own ancestors. They are replacing religion with politics. The BJP is doing exactly what Milosevic did in Serbia, manipulating religion for politics.<sup>32</sup>

Dialogue is as much about intellectual interaction as emotional integration. We grow into each other's world of interests and aspirations. The world we want to build up is the same. Therefore, we build each other up. *Warm-hearted criticism* too is a necessary component of dialogue and a part of co-thinking. Mahatma Gandhi was forthright in his criticism. Tagore as well. When minority communities like Muslims or Christians express their grievances against the majority community, they do not intend to be anti-Hindus. "Many dialogue-prone Christians are genuine admirers of Hinduism."<sup>33</sup>

### **Commitment to Humanity Unites**

Even when we think differently, it is important that we do not concentrate on differences, but look for *points of agreement*. Ananda Coomaraswamy drew attention to similarities in ethics, philosophy, ritual, and art, between Christianity and Hinduism.<sup>34</sup> Vivekananda identified the core values of Hinduism and recognized similar values in other religions. Such a respectful attitude is typical of most Hindu intellectuals.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 228.

<sup>32</sup>Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard, MA: The Belknap Press 2007, 515.

<sup>33</sup>Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 283.

<sup>34</sup>Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 273.

<sup>35</sup>Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 116-117.

Curiously, Koenraad Elst sees many concepts in BJP ideology as being close to the *'integral humanism'* of the Christian Democrats in the West, a theory first proposed by Jacques Maritain. It may be worth studying. The Indian insistence that people should be as conscious of their duty as of their rights is a valid point.<sup>36</sup> Mahatma Gandhi wanted that "the Ganges of rights rises in the Himalaya of responsibilities."<sup>37</sup> In any case, both Hindus and Christians are interested in life-related issues, i.e. concerning tolerance, peace, dignity, promotion of the human person, emancipation, justice. So are the Muslims. Here we have the common ground.

### **Show Respect where Respect is Due: Islam's Contribution**

Warmer conversation is required. We need persons like patriarch Timotheos I, who held dialogue with Al-Mahdi;<sup>38</sup> Francis of Assisi, who went to meet Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil during the siege of Damietta near the mouth of the Nile; Ramon Lull the Catalan, who engaged Muslims in dialogue using Socratic style; Charlemagne, who kept in touch with Harun in his glory.

Muslims look back with pride at their great contribution to culture and civilization in the past. They feel that the Islamic *message of equality* had brought timely relief to the dying civilizations of Greece, Rome, Persia, China and India.<sup>39</sup> Vivekananda frankly admitted that the Muslim conquest of India brought salvation to one fifth of Indians who had been hard pressed.<sup>40</sup>

Muslim *intellectual interest* brought into existence several centres of learning like the one at Cordoba with a library of 400,000 volumes. Among their scholars, Al-Ghazali manifested exceptional intellectual curiosity, critical spirit, power of synthesis, and personal simplicity of life, and anticipated Descartes by six centuries.<sup>41</sup> Then came the period of western expansion, demise of the Ottoman and Mughal empires, *colonial humiliation*, interference in their internal affairs even to our own days, exploitation of their resources. Today with oil wealth and 'youth bulge,' a reaction has gathered strength.

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<sup>36</sup>Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 496-497.

<sup>37</sup>Küng, *Islam*, 576.

<sup>38</sup>Küng, *Islam*, 253.

<sup>39</sup>Küng, *Islam*, 395.

<sup>40</sup>Küng, *Islam*, 334.

<sup>41</sup>Küng, *Islam*, 357.

## Recent Developments

Hans Küng insists that it is unfair to make *stereotypes* of all Muslims as uncultured, obscurantist, archaic in ideas, oppressive of minorities and women, fanatical and violent.<sup>42</sup> Comparing the best in one's own tradition with the worst in another is always unfair. Further, every tradition is best understood from within.

In most Islamic countries, there has been a change in atmosphere from the immediate post-colonial period to our own days. When the western-educated liberal leaders failed to capture power through progressive programmes, they *shifted to conservative* and religious ideals to win the support of the believing masses. Democracy thus led, not to liberal reforms, but often to *radical Islam*. Doors closed to independent thinking. When there is no internal dialogue within a community, external dialogue becomes impossible. In such a situation, dissent is more easily expressed through destruction. Recent instances of violence have been causing international anxiety: at Bali, Casablanca, Riyadh, Istanbul, Madrid, London, Paris, Dhaka, Colombo.<sup>43</sup> In an asymmetrical war the weak feels justified to strike back in unexpected places and in unexpected ways.<sup>44</sup>

As we invite the open-minded of the Muslim society for dialogue, we may ask other groups too whether we could work out together a '*harmony of interests*'.<sup>45</sup> Most Muslims merely want to assert their cultural and religious identity. What they are afraid of is not religious secularism, but religionless secularism. They sincerely stand for spiritual, moral and religious values.<sup>46</sup> Many of their intellectuals are risking their lives in the cause of ethical values, liberty, reform, rights of individuals, uplift of women, respect for diversity.<sup>47</sup>

## The Spontaneous Urge to Share Your Convictions

We must not be quick in concluding that that the *Christian community* is totally free of fundamentalism. Church groups and sects that are determined to remain rigid and arbitrary in the interpretation of the scriptures and denounce other religious traditions and beliefs in utter contempt manifest the same weaknesses of the more radical fundamentalists. Paul tells them, "Your speech should always be pleasant and interesting, and you should know how to give the right

<sup>42</sup>Küng, *Islam*, 4-5.

<sup>43</sup>Küng, *Islam*, xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>44</sup>Taj Hashmi, *Global Jihad and America*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2014, 20.

<sup>45</sup>Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 690.

<sup>46</sup>Küng, *Islam*, 540.

<sup>47</sup>Küng, *Islam*, 548.

answer to everyone" (Col 4:6); and Peter, "... do it with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet 3:15).

Avraham Burg once said that the mission of the Jews was to be a light to the nations. Vajpayee thought India was called to be the *Guru of the nations*, Slavophile Russians that Russia has to save mankind.<sup>48</sup> The Chinese and the Japanese had a similar self-perception. The Byzantines had it in their glorious days. The Vedic seers had it. Islam had it. Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire had the same sense of mission. So did the leaders of the French Revolution.

Of late, ardent atheists like Richard Dawkins have manifested the same instinct. Most recently Steven Pinker has brought out a book, *Enlightenment Now*, with the deliberate intention of resolutely defending Enlightenment ideas in twenty-first century language.<sup>49</sup> So, to feel that you have a special call to *share your convictions* is not something typical only of the Christian missionary, but of many others as well.

### Mutual Sharing and Critical Discernment

As persons with convictions have a right to share their message, it is the listeners' right to evaluate and offer an intelligent response. "Think for yourselves," Buddha often repeated. Spiritual reformers have always called for a deeper and *discerning understanding* of their own religious traditions. "Circumcise your hearts," said Moses (Deut 10:16). "The Sabbath was made for man," said Jesus (Mk 2:27). In fact, most major religions of the world came up with the reform or even rejection of prevalent religious traditions: for example, belief in many gods, natural forces, spirits, image worship, occult practices, and magic (1 Kings 18; 1 Sam 28:3-25). Israelite Prophets questioned even legitimate expressions of religion like fasts, sacrifices, holocausts when they lacked authenticity (Isa 58-3-8; Jer 14:12; Ps 40:6). Jesus continued in the same tradition (Lk 18:12).

This form of criticism is neither opposition nor a call for secularisation, but a part of mature religion itself. It is an invitation to go to the *deeper dimension* of rules and norms and to core human concerns. What counts, Jesus says, is "justice and mercy," not diligent tithing (Mt 23:23). It is an effort to remove from religion what does not stand the test of good sense and sound reason; and link it closely with social responsibility. Jesus initiated a critical evaluation of some of the Jewish traditions. In India Hindus and Buddhists offered

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<sup>48</sup>Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind*, 467.

<sup>49</sup>Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2019, 5.

criticisms to each other for centuries. So did Vaishnavites and Saivites. So do modern thinkers and fierce traditionalists. Creative thinkers in each tradition criticized inconsistent elements in their own tradition as well.

### **Religions Have a Common Mission in the Secular World**

While selfish interests pull religious believers apart, collective interest bring them together. Hans Küng proposed a Global Ethic as a ‘*common ground*’ among religions. He presented it in the Parliament of Religions in 1993 as a widely felt need. Kofi Annan called for “Universal values.” Iranian Khatami suggested a ‘dialogue of civilizations’<sup>50</sup> to promote such causes. Karen Armstrong invites a creative interpretation of the “sacred texts” of all religions in order to enable their adherents to address the problems of the day, especially the “ecological and social crisis.”<sup>51</sup>

A collective *sense of responsibility* must be roused in the followers all faiths to address the anxieties of the day. That is what Jesus did in an emergency situation, instructing his disciples: ‘you’ give them something to eat (Lk 9:13). Mahabharata, Anushasana Parva 7-7 expresses a similar concern for the hungry. Jesus’ instruction to his disciples to attend to a vast variety of human needs as they went on their mission (Mt 10:8), is an invitation to offer committed assistance wherever it is needed. “Go you now monks,” said Buddha, “for the benefit of many, for the welfare of mankind.” The Koran says, “And we do not send the messengers but as bearers of good tidings and warners” (VI, 48, 49). Abdul Kalam describes his own sense of mission in this manner, “For us to ignite our spirituality we need to look inward and transcend our egos. We need to recognize, connect with and integrate the eternal spirit within.”<sup>52</sup>

Transcending the ego is not an easy task. The concrete reality of the world today is that believers in one religion have to work with believers in other religions, and increasingly with people who have no religion at all or do not take their religion seriously. A common vocabulary is not easy to develop for interactions. As religious savants differ, experts in different secular sciences to differ, not only in preferred concepts and method of enquiry, but also in habits of mind and presumptions about the world.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Küng, *Islam*, 654-655, 658

<sup>51</sup>Karen Armstrong, *The Lost Art of Scripture*, London: The Bodley Head, 2019, 428.

<sup>52</sup>A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, *Transcendence*, HarperCollins, Noida, 2015, xiii.

<sup>53</sup>Daniel K. Finn, ed., *Empirical Foundations of the Common Good*, Oxford University Press, 2017, 1.



Theology tends to be excessively “irenic” and *idealistic* about human nature; social sciences *realistic*, and even pessimistic, and often pragmatic.<sup>54</sup> The consequence is that religious leaders make fervent appeals or high demands with little understanding of social processes, totally innocent of facts, figures, and trends.<sup>55</sup> Social scientists, on the contrary, seek to find out how society actually works, base themselves on empirical data, suggest a healthy competition of economic players to ensure efficient production and balanced distribution.

On the other hand, it is important to recognize the human ability to rise above selfish interests.<sup>56</sup> A concern for others is also part of human identity. This *public spirit* can be cultivated, in the family, in society,<sup>57</sup> and in religious groups. Faith provides the highest motivation. After all, all recognize “higher forms of human flourishing” than mere economic achievements.<sup>58</sup> The danger lies in social scientists like economists shaping our culture with their ‘partial’ view of human nature. The human being is not merely a bundle of selfishness.

However, a *cross-fertilization* of ideas, convictions and disciplines will enrich every sector of humanity.<sup>59</sup> Religious exhortations/arguments can be strengthened by empirical evidences. Jesus often appealed to the evidence of human experience (Lk 14:5). Of all arguments, a genuine human concern has the highest convincing power. Even the atheist Bertrand Russel remembers his conversion to commitment. “It all happened in five minutes,” he says.<sup>60</sup>

Transcending the ego is the door to mysticism. A sincere commitment of believers to human concerns and social causes side by side with ardent secularists will turn out to be a uniquely ‘holy’ context in which the transcendent dimension of human endeavours will manifest itself. Paul Tillich seems to have felt his faith deepest in totally secularised (God-emptied) moments in his life.<sup>61</sup> When a believer feels the ecstasy of assisting the needy along with other fellow beings, it may be compared to a mystic experience, a

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<sup>54</sup>Finn, ed., *Empirical Foundations of the Common Good*, 26.

<sup>55</sup>Finn, ed., *Empirical Foundations of the Common Good*, 215.

<sup>56</sup>Finn, ed., *Empirical Foundations of the Common Good*, 217.

<sup>57</sup>Finn, ed., *Empirical Foundations of the Common Good*, 219, 221.

<sup>58</sup>Finn, ed., *Empirical Foundations of the Common Good*, 226.

<sup>59</sup>Finn, ed., *Empirical Foundations of the Common Good*, 229.

<sup>60</sup>Bertrand Russel, *Russel on Religion*, Routledge, London, 2007, 15.

<sup>61</sup>Finn, ed., *Empirical Foundations of the Common Good*, 95.

transcending joy that only persons like Vincent de Paul and Mother Teresa have experienced.

### **Conclusion**

The special gift of the modern 'mystic' is to be able to recognise an intimate relationship that exists among all those who are committed to the common good. The "seeds of the Gospel" that are to be found in all diverse convictions that contribute to the common good should be recognised as of great value and their resources should be fully tapped to strengthen the Gospel mission of bringing all people together for a happy future.