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RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND THE PRESENT CRISIS

Some friends asked me, "did you sleep well?" "I said, no Indian has the moral right to sleep well." The degradation that is overtaking us so rapidly, alas! in the name of God and religion, deprives us of the relatively little title to live and let other people live. Why does this happen? Recall what Swami Vivekananda had said more than once and with the power of rhetoric which was unique to him? Religions have been responsible for more massacres than any other instrumentality or cause in this world. And yet religion has been so tender as to look after the whole of humanity. We have had the Buddha, who spoke of Karuna, we have had Asoka who spoke of the fellowship of faiths; we have had Jesus whose heart was bleeding for the poor all the time. We have had Mahatma Gandhi who saw divinity in every 'daridra narayana'. And that was why Vivekananda came out with the claim "mathrudevo bhava, pithrudevo bhava." This is what Hindus are used to hearing and uttering. But Vivekananda added to it: "Daridrudevo bhava." Blessed are the poor not in heaven, here.

What has fascinated me often is a passage which I came across when I opened up the Bible after visiting Fr. Francis Sales, CMI, in Cochin, an old friend of mine who passed away, few years ago. He was ailing. I went to see him, opened up the Bible and saw the passage which struck me. "Blessed are they who hunger for right and justice; they shall be answered" – right and justice. This is religion! And again Vivekananda told us: "Religion is the manifestation of the divinity already in man". So nothing is religion which does not posit divinity. I have divinity in me, potential divinity; manifest it. Are we denying any religion when manifest our divinity? The hindu has divinity in him. The christian has divinity in him. And that is why Jesus said that the kingdom of God is within you! Not on Sunday. That is what Bernard Shaw called "crosstianity". Go on Sunday, worship there and come back. "Crosstianity" for one day, no christianity for the rest of the week.

Compassion, and what is most important for us Indians, is that whatever we may speak of religion, politics and the bills and legislation in connection with all these, but in Indian Constitution we have religion writ - not with the secular articles 25 to 30, but in the fundamental duties chapter. They will not recognize it as religion. It is the fundamental duty of every citizen to practice compassion for living creatures. This is article 51 (A): "practice compassion for the living creatures". Another sub-article says, you shall practice humanism.

We have two phrases in the Indian Constitution: Scientific temper and humanism. They go together. It is not as scientific temper means materialism and humanism means Godwardness. No science is worth science unless it is humanist. No religion is real religion unless it has humanism center to its teaching. So be it Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, or any other religion, or atheistic, but deeply committed to man's faith. All of them uphold that great value which we may generalise by calling "spirituality". And the malady of today, the pathology of today, is the spiritual vacuum which has been created during the last few decades in this country. So the real problem that we face in India and perhaps in the whole world is how to eliminate the spiritual vacuum and how to bridge the moral vacuum.

Religion is not a particular cult. Of course, we have made it a cult; we have made it a ritual; we have made it obdurate obscurantism. Truly speaking spiritual realization that is there already in us is the true religion. I have stated often, may be ludicrous to say so, that I am a christian. Why? Because I am a Hindu. I am a Muslim, Why? Because, I am a Hindu. The Hindu faith says that the wise man sees truth from various angles. But truth is one and indivisible. With christian lens or islamic lens or hindu lens you may look at it, but truth is one. That is why Mahatma Gandhi said, God is truth. This unifying principle, this universal appreciation of the fellowship of religion somehow has been jettisoned in this country.

Thanks to the politics of power-grab, it is impossible for this country, whatever the Bills the Parliament may pass, whatever the amendments we may make, to rid itself from communalism until spirituality is inhaled by the nation as such. When we speak of Babri Masjid, or Ramajanmabhoomi, the destruction and the collapse of Babri Masjid did not take place in one day or in a

few hours. The operation has been all along there. It has been growing. This hate cult has been going on. Operation downfall, the operation that is in the country's scenario can best be described as operation downfall.

Sometime ago, I had a lecture to deliver in honour of a certain friend of mine in the Calicut University, and I gave the title, "What a fall, my countrymen!" This land gave birth or adopted centuries ago faiths of all kinds, not Hinduism as such. The word 'Hindu' itself is a later product. We had the *Vedas* spoken universally. It was not meant for India, we cannot have territorial jurisdiction for religions. Again we had Buddhism. When the Hindu or *Vedic* priestcraft abused its position, it indulged in himsa or violence, the great protest came from Buddha who renounced his throne, and went to find out why there is *dukkha*, suffering. Does it strike; ring bell?

Christians, what did Jesus do on the cross?-, *dukkha*, the same *dukkha*; suffering, intense suffering; restless wandering; throw away these things. I do not want this; I do not want the throne; kingdoms, husband, wives, or the sensuous or sensual pleasures. I do not want power, but I want humanity to be healed of suffering. Then came people who identified suffering as caused by exploitation. Exploitation can be social exploitation. What Dr. Ambedkar had already been telling us, in his final address to the Constituent Assembly. When the Constitution had finally been passed, he said: social exploitation. He said: "today, by signing this constitution and giving every man a vote we have given to ourselves political democracy. But where is social democracy? where is economic democracy? He believed in *Karuna*, *samatha*, *prajna*. *Prajna*-understanding, discernment. *Samatha*-equality of person-hood. Not that everybody must have the same height, that man and woman must be equal biologically, but *samatha* is that equal opportunity for unfolding one's personality which really is divinity manifest. Your faculties in their fullness bloom. Every little flower blossoms. There is equality with the neighbouring flower which blossoms in its own way. Thus we have no social democracy in this country, and we have certainly no economic democracy. And often these are the products of, or strengthened by abuse of religion.

Religion is deep. It is the inner being. That is why, sixty years after banning religion in a manner, the Soviet Union found that

religion still flourished. Toynbee in his book, *History of the World* said, sixty years of experiment has proved that religion is far too deep to be banned or banished. TADA or any other terrorist legislation will not succeed in this country in producing secularism unless it begins from the heart of man. Religion is the source of inspiration. Religion can also be the source of most heinous of crimes. It depends on how we look at it. Secularism is not banishment of religion. The solution is in a new dialogue, a vital dialogue, a dynamic, vibrant understanding that all religions can come together.

Vivekananda wrote to his Muslim friend that *Advaita* was the earliest gift that Hindu religion gave to the world. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights which we proclaimed in 1948 is the materialist manifestation of the *Advaita*, the spiritual essence of it. *Advaita* was granted by the Hindus to the earliest humanity. But did they practice it? They vivisected it. This caste, that caste, this sect, that sect, this cult, the other cult; vivisection became the rule of life. Domination through priesthood became the rule of practice. That was a praxis. Then he adds that if ever *Advaita* was practiced in any religion, it was in Islam and Islam alone. Now how can we fight, then? Islam practices Hinduism. Hinduism gave the cardinal principles which is practiced by Islam. And where is the dispute between us?

Governor Kurshid Alam Khan has stated that how the Amritsar temple, which to the Sikhs, is the Mecca, or to the Hindu, Varanasi, how its foundation was laid by a Muslim saint. And today there is one temple in Kerala which has the largest number of pilgrims in the whole country - Sabarimala Ayyappa. You know that Ayyappa is eighteen steps above and the one who conducted him to that spot through the forest was a Muslim called "Vavar". We are killing each other in the name of Babri Masjid. But here hindus in their millions are offering to their representative of Babar, a representative of Vavar, who was the conductor of Sabari Ayyappa through the forests of Sabari. How together we are? Same thing happens in Ajmir, the holiest place of Muslims in India. A Collector of Ajmir, told me, about an year ago, Sir, there is the Pushkar temple and the Pushkar Lake - holiest for the Hindus. The priests of Pushkar collect roses from the Pushkar garden and daily take it to the Ajmir Mosque and offer it there. How sublime an example of fellowship of faiths! And go anywhere you like; take teachings of Jesus Christ; take

the Bible. I read in every line of Jesus, every preachment of Jesus, every commandment of Jesus, Hinduism written large provided I have the heart to drop the name Hindu and the name Christian and say here is God speaking. God speaks through the Bible; through Vedas; the Quran; through every other religious teaching. Have we risen to the level of divinity where we can be called half way house between creation and realization of the divinity which is our ultimate destiny. The pity is that we are so violent. What is happening to this country everyday? It is becoming more violent, because we have ceased to be religious: to be spiritual, We have ceased to understand real brotherhood; we have ceased to have compassion.

When in Bosnia, the Muslims are being butchered, my heart bleeds. Last day when I was talking to my Muslim friends at a public meeting I asked them, did your Muslim party pass a resolution protesting against the Bosnia Muslims being butchered. Who are you? Politics has created cataract in your eyes. You are not able to see that a Muslim is being butchered. I am able to feel human solidarities in danger. The same thing happens to every christian. Christians dying are humans dying Hindus are being killed, or Muslims are being killed, in Surat and in Bombay; you and I weep, because humans are perishing. Can we stand this? It is from the depth of sorrow that we have to bring a sense of urgency to the dialogue that is necessary for India.

Unfortunately, the only secular force in this country is universal corruption. There, there is no difference in religion. There are corrupt Hindus, corrupt Muslims, corrupt Christians; corruption is everywhere. And corruption is using religion. In the Bombay riots, we found that corrupt elements of the underworld were using Muslims against Hindus and Hindus against Muslims. The corrupt elements in politics were using Hindus against Muslims and Muslims against Hindus in Surat. Religion against religion. Dean Swift long ago said: "We have enough religion to hate each other, but not enough religion to love each other". Today the answer is a divinised form of secularism, not the materialized, vulgarized form of secularism. Jawaharlal Nehru, in his Autobiography, has quoted a definition of religion. One chapter is on what is religion. And there he quotes Romain Roland.

A man who lives for the benefit of his self but selflessly for the benefit of others, is a truly religious person. By that standard Karl Marx

was truly religious. And the great Ranganadananda of the Vivekananda Mission used to refer to Karl Marx as "Maharshi Marx". Because, he did not want to exploit. He wanted to put an end to exploitation; he wanted to promote human happiness. Whether you believed in God or in gods, is immaterial. What is essential is the depth of humanism, a feeling of compassion, that is christianity. Christ went on the cross; nail after nail was struck on his body. Today, I think of the cross so often. Every-day I think of the Cross, suffering and passion of Christ. Why? Because there should be no suffering. He suffered for you and me. That spirit of compassion which came from Christianity - love everyone as you love yourself. But many do not love themselves. That is the great difficulty. They do not know who they are. "Who am I?" is the basic question. They only know that they hate others. I grab what he has. And until I get that, I am not happy - the surrender to '*bhoga*'. The great ailment that the world is now afflicted with is the "*bhoga syndrome*", if I may call it. It is far worse than the AIDS. I want women, I want fast food, fast life, power, money - power, political power, every other top forms of power which would add to aggrandizes my own sensual, lustful powers, or enjoyment. Now it is here that we have been derailed or hijacked nationally. To bring them back is the only salvation for India - through religion.

But then we have too many religions - such religions that Edmund Burke in the impeachment of Warren Hastings in England said, "we deal with a country which has even plague as god for them, small pox as god for them - that is the kind of people we are dealing with". Here it is not the plague or small pox that is god. But god has been made small pox, plague, by every religion in the country. I say in this dialogue, a new dialogue, a dynamic dialogue, a dialogue based upon dialectical realities of India today, we must collapse or we must survive. This 'to be' or 'not to be' is the challenge today. Realize that tomorrow does not exist for us.

I have stated long ago in an Ambedkar memorial lecture that the first half of this century saw India free, but the second half of this century must see Indians free. Today Indians are not free. They are afraid. I see a Musalman. I am afraid. The musalman sees a Hindu armed to the teeth, he is afraid. Both of them are enemies in the field of opinion as well as in the field of religious thought. He who does not agree with you is converted into an adversary. This disease of

'adversariasis' in the field of religion is really the cause of our human suffering. Who survives if India dies; who dies if India lives, who lives if India dies, this is the challenge of the times.

Curiously enough, this challenge can be met only through a dialogue, not among politicians, not among artists, not in the Central Hall of Parliament; but by those who belong to various religions, but committed to one great principle, the central principle, the sacred principle; the profound rule that this entirety of creation is man: man, woman and child. Look at the atrocities today, sometimes in the name of religion. Long ago Bernard Shaw told us and Darwin taught the world, not that all men were monkeys once, but that some monkeys have no tails. Now we are all monkeys, taking to some crude concepts calling them religion and fighting and killing each other.

O Lord, forgive us; we have lived through bad days. O Lord, awaken us to what we truly are. *Asato ma Sat gamaya*. That is precisely the prayer with which I would like to end a dialogue without inhibitions, a prayerful meet with reverence for all, a fellowship of faiths where we do not have reservations, a conviction that we shall succeed, a command that India and the world shall go together.