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World Problems and the Emergence of a New Interreligious Perspective

The increased involvement of religions today in the worldly problems of man has brought a new dimension to the ongoing interaction among World Religions. In the past they focussed very much on their divergent approaches to man's final destiny and the nature of the ultimate Reality man was aiming at. Today greater emphasis is placed on the intermediary stages on the passage to the final goal and on the various means used in bringing about the rule of the Divine Principle in this world itself. I shall take the history of the Christian-Hindu interaction in India in the recent past as a model for examining the dynamics of the common religious perspective that is emerging today.

Criticisms and Counter-Criticisms

Ever since the Western colonial powers set foot on the Indian soil starting from the sixteenth century under the pretext of trade, a virulent attack was unleashed against Hinduism, Islam and other non-Christian religions. The tone for this was set by the Spanish king who, in dispatching Captain Cabral with seventeen ships to India in 1502, exhorted the sailors never to relent in their fight against the enemies of Christ. One of the first acts of the Portuguese after capturing Goa was to confiscate the properties of Hindu temples and ask the Hindus either to become Christians or to leave the place. Even benevolent missionaries like Friar Vincent, St Francis Xavier and Robert de Nobili who showed great sympathy for Hindu customs and traditions followed a strategy of negative criticism of Hindu beliefs and practices for gaining converts to Christianity. After the arrival of the Dutch and British Protestant missionaries in the 18th century this negative criticism concentrated on Hindu idol worship and social abuses like child marriage and the burning of widows.

After more than a hundred years of this relentless criticism Hindu leaders, who began to work for obtaining national independence from the Western powers, realized the justice of that criticism and initiated by themselves a process of social reform fighting superstition, idolatry, child marriage and the like. They went a step further and showed a great willingness to learn from Christianity. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, one of the Hindu reformers, in his *The Precepts of Jesus the Guide to Peace and Happiness*, a compilation of the moral teachings of Jesus, acclaimed Jesus as the greatest moral teacher, without, however, acknowledging him as Christ, the Son of God or embracing Christianity. Kesub Chunder Sen, another reformer of Hinduism was willing to accept Jesus Christ as the greatest manifestation of the Godhead in human form as if in a crystal. Similarly Pratap Sundar Majumadar, also remaining a Hindu acknowledged Christ as the universal Guru: Socrates for the Greeks, he said, Confucius for the Chinese, Krishna for the Indians; but Christ is the divine incarnation for all men. Several organizations like the Brahma Samaj and the New Dispensation were formed to achieve a synthesis between Hinduism and Christianity. Only very few among the Hindu Reformers, among them Kali Charan Banerjee who later took the name Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, became Christians proclaiming: Jesus of Nazareth is truly the Son of God; he really rose from the dead.

After almost a century of this positive Hindu appreciation of Christianity, the Hindu leaders went on the offensive. In 1896 Swami Vivekananda, a disciple of the great Hindu mystic Ramakrishna Paramahansa took his case to the West by attending the World Parliament of Religions at Evanston, Ill., and accusing Western Christianity of gross materialism and a lack of interiority of the spirit. He toured the Western countries preaching the mystical message of Hinduism. Organizations like Arya Samaj were formed to counter the proselytizing influence of Christian missionaries. Scholars like Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, a student of Madras Christian College, and a 'Hindu victim' as he put it, of the humiliating negative criticism of the Christian missionaries, took the Hindu message far and wide in the academic circles of the West.

Western Christian scholars appeared only too eager to return the courtesy of the early Hindu Reformers and to acknowledge the positive value of Hindu experience for Christians. Raimundo Panikkar in

his *Unknown Christ of Hinduism* argued that Christ was already present in Hinduism under concepts like Brahman and Iswara, though unknown to and unrecognized by the Hindus. For him the traditional emphasis on the historical Jesus is quite secondary, a method of approach peculiar to the Mediterranean people by which the Cosmic Christ is particularized in Palestinian culture. John Cobb Jr. argues that Jesus Christ is only one particular expression of the universal Logos with other equally valid expressions like the Buddha and Krishna. Karl Rahner went to the extent of saying that the followers of other religions are anonymous Christians. Gordon Kaufmann states that saying Jesus Christ is the Saviour of all men is too tall a claim to carry conviction to any one in the religious pluralism of today.

Then the crucial question arises: Why the Christian missions? What has Christianity to offer to the world in the religious field other than the Western culture with which it has often been wrongly and arrogantly identified? Here one may be falling back into the obviously unacceptable missionary theology of Schleiermacher according to whom the task of the Christian missionary was not simply to preach an abstract doctrine but to communicate to the world the superior Western culture in which the Gospel has taken flesh. Such cultural imperialism is universally rejected today as a remnant of the colonialist attitudes of the past. Hence it is high time that Christians went back to the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus Christ and found out what is fundamental in it and what aspects of it are merely accidental additions which occurred through the vicissitudes of history.

Shifts in the Missionary Position

Here again there have been a number of shifts in the Christian missionary position towards other religions. The traditional classical position taken by great missionaries like St Francis Xavier and Robert de Nobili was to present Christianity as a creed, a system of doctrine parallel to and opposed to other religious systems. In 1913 J.N. Farquahr published his *The Crown of Hinduism*, and in it he tried to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian teachings over other religious systems. According to him at the turn of the twentieth century when human civilization had reached a certain climax in the West all religions of the world had been brought to the consciousness of humanity. They had been assessed and all religions other than Chris-

tianity had been found wanting. Of course all religions contained some truths. But in the event of a crisis only Christianity could withstand it and survive; others bound to past traditions would fall apart. But this boastful claim received a terrible shock the very next year (1914) when, with the beginning of World War I, Christian nations were fighting against each other.

After World War I the missionary focus shifted from apologetics to a theology of Revelation: All religions including Christianity have to be judged in the light of the unique historical Revelation in Christ. The World Missionary Conference at Tambaram near Madras in 1938 declared that the followers of other religions had to die themselves and to their beliefs and traditions in order to embrace the one historical divine Revelation in Jesus Christ. But this Western faith in history and historical revelation received a serious jolt from the World War II which began in 1939 and destroyed in the eyes of many theologians the historical continuity of European civilization founded in Christianity. Then the missionary focus shifted to Christology: Word Theology declared that the Word of God is the timeless judgment of God unaffected by history and that faith is an existential encounter with the cosmic Christ, the Logos who is the same yesterday, today and for ever. But with the subsequent rebuilding of Western Europe faith in history also revived in theologians and the focus of missionary preaching has shifted from Christology to eschatology: What is fundamental in Christianity is the economy of human salvation definitively accomplished in Jesus Christ and moving towards its fulfilment in the eschaton. The Resurrection of Christ is a sort of model in which we can discern this total divine economy of human salvation. Other religions too are part of God's plan and hence in their own way by a sort of convergence move towards the fulfilment of history in Christ. The missionary task is to discern the positive elements or at least the "seeds of the Word" in other religions and accelerate this process of convergence both in individuals and communities so that all can see their fullness in the Omega that is Christ.

Are We Now at a Dead End ?

These attacks and counter attacks, expressions of mutual admiration and shifts of focus in interreligious discussion seem to raise the question whether we are going to make any further progress in inter-

religious dialogue. The centuries long theoretical discussions have not brought religions any closer. If proselytization and conversion are the ideal, in view of the meagre results of the past twenty centuries one may wonder whether we are going to get much farther in the future.

Besides, the different religious traditions have become so intimately identified with certain particular socio-cultural contexts that their receptivity to ideas and values from other traditions looks minimal. Thus Christianity has become so much identified with the Graeco-Roman terminology and thought pattern and become a prisoner to its own language that it seems impervious to the values and concerns of Eastern religions. Moreover, the material affluence and political superiority of the West have produced in the Western people a certain religio-cultural self-assurance with a feeling that it does not need to learn from the other traditions, which it does not understand well any way. Further, down the centuries in history the churches have created institutional structures like the parish and the diocese which ascribe the pride of place to external organization and administration with only a subordinate role given to personal faith and experience. Bishops and priests look more like fund-raisers, managers and business executives than spiritual leaders and real men of God. The followers of Eastern religions like the Hindus and Buddhists, in spite of their economic dependence on the West and admiration for the scientific and technological progress and the administrative genius of Western peoples, place greater emphasis on religious experience. Since they do not pay sufficient attention to the faith experience in Western religions they think they have nothing much to learn in this respect from Christians and Jews.

More serious still is the decline of organized religion in its influence on the lives of men. In the opinion of Martin E. Marty the new ethos of industrial enterprise, urbanization and nationalism, and the creeds like liberalism, evolutionism, socialism or historicism have become a rival to the church. In the onslaught of modernity "social institutions and popular attitudes have become more a threat to, than a sustaining force for religious belief." The new democratic outlook which seeks fulfilment through co-operative effort wants to be free from all authoritarianism even when it is religious, rejects tradition as a limitation on the autonomy of personal decisions and places a pre-

mium on personal privacy. Today more than one-third of humanity is formally atheistic, and of the rest formally listed under one or another religion, only a small percentage does actually practise their religion in the traditional sense.

Here religion itself presents a basis for scandal to the modern man. It was the young Hegel who pointed this out when in his analysis of the alienations of human life he found their supreme source in religion. It consists in the conceptualization and objectification of the divine which create a "bad infinity" positing an infinite being over and above the finite world. This view of God as a stranger and object, the almighty supreme Being in heaven, has been to a great extent adopted by official Christianity. This inherited religion is, according to Hegel, the source of the threefold alienation of man from nature, from himself and from his fellow human beings. For, man is asked to turn away from his environment, this evil world, to find God. Thus falsely separating himself from nature man exposes himself to nature's domination, exploitation and eventual destruction. Looking for a God over and above human life and history people become estranged from their own depth looking on themselves as empty. Hence instead of discovering himself in the lives of others man seeks a freedom that separates him from others and secretly yearns to become independent of God himself. The objectification of the divine is in fact, due to people's refusal to love and to live a reconciled life.

Religious Values and Religions

The decline in the influence of organized religions does in no way imply that religion as such has become obsolete. In fact, as Andrew M. Greeley emphatically states in his *Unsecular Man*: "The basic human religious needs and the basic religious functions have not very notably changed since the late Ice Age; what changes have occurred make religious questions more critical rather than less critical in the contemporary world." Changes indeed have taken place; but they only show what was purely secondary and accidental in religion and what the primary and abiding concerns of religion are: i) Religion cannot be identified with external structures. Today religion has no direct influence over large corporate structures, Big Government, Big Business, Big Labour, Big Military and Big Education. One may even ask whether this may not be paradoxically true even with regard to Big

Church. Religious authority can be easily exploited for personal or collective prestige, money and power. Idolatry, which is the absolutization of the finite including things, concepts and traditions, superstition, legalism, hypocrisy, and blindness of heart, presents a serious threat even to the churches.

ii) Contrary to what was once assumed as true, religion does not seem to be absolutely necessary for the maintenance of the moral order in the world. Even though more than one-third of humanity is officially atheistic there is no open denial of moral values. As Erig-Hoffer, the Longshoreman author, wrote with his devastating simplicity, "God and priest have disappeared from public life; but the world goes on all the same."

iii) Similarly, a number of phenomena once explained by an appeal to God and religion have now found their own rational interpretations. On the other hand, the development of the capacities for abstract, rational and scientific thought has not done away with the need for myth and symbol. Every effort at demythologization of faith is followed by a movement for its re-mythologization.

iv) More than ever today religion is a more explicit and individual matter, not readily taken for granted as in the past, but calling for personal commitment and free choice.

These changes in the applicational aspects of religion only help to show what is basic, universal and permanent in the religious quest of man. Religion provides man with a 'faith', a meaning system to cope with the ultimate problems of human life, evil, suffering and death. If there is a God who is absolute Good why is there evil? Why should the innocent suffer? What is the meaning of life in the face of death? Hence if religions should reach any common understanding they must move away from secondary matters of structures, traditions and moral prescriptions to the basic concerns of human life. These problems have to be faced both on the individual and communitarian levels, the fields of psychology and sociology. Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, the recognized pioneers and leaders of religious sociology, rightly pinpointed these areas when the former described religion as a meaning system and the latter ascribed to religion the task of community building.

From Life to Dogma

The greatest obstacle to achieving appreciable results in interreligious understanding is to start the discussion from established doctrines of different religious traditions and groups. Doctrines by their nature are abstract formulations of truth made in certain circumstances and historical situations in order to summarize rationally and formulate clearly the experience of a believing community in order to exclude certain errors threatening the faith of the community and to provide guidelines for the people to understand their faith. Often these formulations are taken outside their genetic context and absolutized as immutable truths in themselves. When such formulations, whether philosophical or religious, are taken as the point of departure for religious discussions the fact that they are historically and culturally conditioned is easily forgotten and the head on confrontation of opposing formulations becomes inevitable. No one can be asked to compromise what he holds to be true. Any such compromise will be a betrayal of truth itself. The only alternatives will be either for one side to surrender and admit its position to be wrong accepting the other's position as true, or fall into a certain relativism of truth saying that each formulation is true for its adherents. Often, out of politeness dialoguing partners avoid such hard decisions and conclude the discussion without any appreciable change of ideas on any side but with a hidden complacency in one's own truth and a condescending sympathy for the ignorance of the other. The answer to this difficulty is to go back to the matrix of such formulations the concrete historical situations in which the experience of the Transcendent meaning was received.

History the Context of Religious Experience

No religion started as an abstract system of ideas and observances. Every known religion of humanity began as a movement with the inspiration of one or more individuals perceived and followed by a group of people. Hence all sincere interreligious dialogue must start with a sense of history, an awareness of the original vision of the religious founder, the concrete historical situation in which his vision was expressed. Buddhism as a religion is unintelligible if one does not take into account the concrete historical situation in which Siddhartha Gautama Buddha Sakyamuni received his illumination, the socio-reli-

gious and political forces he was reacting against and the attitude and concerns of the people to which his message was addressed. Similarly, discussing Christianity detaching it from the historical personality of Jesus Christ will be a gross distortion of the Gospel. The Good News preached by the disciples of Christ from the very beginning was that in Jesus of Nazareth something happened that has radically changed the course of human history and the order of the world itself and that all men have to be made aware of that great "Christ-event."

But there is great scope for interaction among religions regarding the interpretation of history. History is not a mere recounting of events, if at all such simple recounting were possible. Even in simply recounting an event the witness makes a selection among the details which reflects his own interpretation of the event. Western historians tend to emphasize the complexity, the event, the clash of personalities involved, the conflict and interrelationship of the various factors and the general pattern that emerges out of such a conflict. Eastern historians on the other hand, tend to view every happening in time as a vague and inadequate reflection of the eternal within the limitations of the finite, a myth. One can emphasize the unique and unrepeatable character of the particular happening in time and stress the value of its unique individuality and another, with equal justice, can give importance not to the fleeting moment in time but its enduring value and meaning in the light of the eternal.

Religious Psychology the Focus of Interaction

In dealing with religions often the deep religious feeling of people is dismissed as a mere remnant of the past, as carry over from an infantile period. Freud and Freudians generally discount religion as an abnormality, an escape from reality by an appeal to a father figure. But as Max Weber pointed out that man is a seeker of meaning. Even with all the scientific knowledge, technological progress and material wealth he needs faith in a transcendent order of existence, support of a community, and proper integration to the world in which he lives. Even as part of human culture religion has great value. Culture is a historically transmitted meaning system providing an explanation for life and the world either by a simple acceptance through common sense or interpreting them systematically through art, political ideology, science or religion. Religion deals with what lies beyond the sphere of ordinary knowledge comprising the basic problems of

human existence, and provides a system of symbols that present to man the factuality of ultimate meaning, and creates powerful, pervasive and longlasting attitudes and motivations for acting in accordance with the ultimate goal and meaning.

The great variety of psychological approaches used by the different religions to explain the ultimate and transcendent meaning of human life provides great scope for positive dialogue among them. Western religions in general, have placed the various psychological values, economic, aesthetic, political and religious, side by side trying to integrate them in a total world view through an appeal to a supreme Cause or ultimate End. Israel presents the psychology of a desert people that saw unification of its experience in the fidelity of Yahweh, its liberator, law-giver and leader. Islam gives us a typical example of the tribal psychology of the Arab world replacing the bond of blood with that of faith. Eastern psychology generally sees the divine Spirit as the core of one's own selfhood, the Self of the self around which other concerns of happiness, knowledge, pleasure, health and wealth are placed in concentric circles.

Religious Sociology and Social Identification

Emile Durkheim rejected the various theories of religion that ascribed its origin to pure individual psychology, personal experiences feelings, needs and frustrations and insisted that religion is never found apart from a collectivity. For him religion is the source of social identification. It unifies people linking them to their common history and strengthening them in their common task. Gods are simply "the hypostatic forms of society." Andrew Greeley answers those who dismiss religion of the people as mere cultural remnants of the past: "It is one of the elementary principles of the sociology of religion that all religion is cultural, all religion involves social forces."

Religious sociology also provides ample opportunity for interaction among religions especially between East and West. Western sociology looks at society as a certain balance of competing forces. Their unity and harmony may be thought of either as a natural outcome of the conflict in which at any given time one force dominates over the others, though in turn roles may be reversed the slave eventually becoming

the master, or as a contractual situation arrived at through deliberate common agreement. As Peter Berger sets forth in detail in his *Rumor of Angels*, in the midst of this conflict of forces religion emerges through the signs of the transcendent: The self-assurance of a mother that calms a child disturbed by its dreams saying "everything is all right!", the relative independence and beatific immunity of play in the midst of life, man's blind and persistent hope that says 'No' to death, the spontaneous sense of outrage at flagrant violations of the moral order, and even the fascination the comic figure of a fool like Don Quixote holds for us, show there is something more to human society than what appears on the surface. As Langdon Gilkey explains in his *Naming the Whirlwind*, the secular experience of men today has behind it a certain "context of ultimacy." That means that a secular society refuses a purely secular understanding. It is the sacred that establishes and gives value to the secular. But the tension between conflicting temporal concerns and the unifying transcendental hope will always be there, and if the framework of ultimacy is taken as a sort of escape from the present tasks, as Karl Marx rightly complains, religion can become a sort of opium for the people.

Eastern social thought has sought the resolution for the conflict of classes and forces in society in a sort of monistic conception of a ground and source of all social functions and powers. The Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaisya and the Sudra, the king and the priest all receive their particular roles in society from the one Brahman. Hence the social order is not something imposed from the outside as a sort of external law but is the inner dynamism which makes each individual member and group use the gifts and graces received from the one source for the service of all. The call of religion is not to deny or leave the world but to transform it and make it conformable to the one underlying Self of all.

From Life Experience to Theology

History, psychology and sociology, Eastern and Western, provide us with a great variety of approaches to the problems of man and lead us to the threshold of religion. From what has been said it is obvious that all attempts to reduce religion to mere history, psychology or sociology will miss the transcendental meaning and context of ultimacy humanity is looking for. Hence history, psychology and

sociology and all the temporal concerns of man can only be taken as the starting point in religious interaction. A rational understanding of the problems of ultimacy presented in these fields will certainly call for transcendental explanations. But here religious doctrine instead of being the starting point of interreligious interaction will appear as the end result.