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THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE UNITY AND HARMONY OF THE NATION

There is a sense in which it is presumptious to speak about the role of religions in the unity and harmony of the nation. There are many who would see religion as one of the most divisive forces in society and would look at harmony between religions as itself an essential prerequisite for national unity. "Traditional religions have been" writes Stanley J. Samartha, "moats of separation rather than bridges of understanding between peoples. Recognizing this, how can men and women, committed to different faiths, live together in multi-religious societies? In a world that is becoming a smaller and smaller neighbourhood, what are the alternatives between shallow friendliness and intolerant fanaticism?"[1]

Fanaticism, however, need not be the only reason why religions divide people. It is in the nature of religion to create communities of commitment that are separated from one another. "Each religion is a *singular* phenomenon and is, in a way a *judgement* passed on every other religion" writes Aloysius Pieris, ". . . it is in their nature to provoke *comparison* and mutual *criticism*, *confrontation* and reciprocal *correction;* these being the intermediary stages between mere tolerance with which dialogue begins and positive "participation" in which dialogue should culminate."[2]

When we look around the world, however, it would appear that the 'reciprocal correction' and 'positive participation' that Pieris is asking for is somehow not easily forthcoming, and religions more than ever before are being used and abused in situations of conflict and war, further eroding the confidence people have in religion as a force of reconciliation and peace. What are some of the causes of this?

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1. S.J. Samartha, "Religious Pluralism and the Quest for Human Community" in *No Man is Alien. Essays on the Unity of Mankind*, edited by J. R. Nelson, (Leiden : E. J. Brill, 1971), p. 129.
2. Aloysius Pieris, "Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism : A Theological Reading of Historical Encounters", *Dialogue*, New Series, Vol. VII, No. 2. (1980), p. 49.

A study document prepared by the Churches' Commission on International Affairs and the Dialogue sub-unit of the World Council of Churches gives a useful summary of some of the reasons why religions have become deeply embroiled in some of the conflicts of our time, each of which can be expanded and could be illustrated from concrete situations :

– Religion as a component of nationalism;

– Religious factors exacerbating tensions and conflicts whose root causes are socio-political and economic;

– Religious factors and sentiments being deliberately used to highten tensions;

– Religious notions of state transforming political institutions and leading to conflicts;

– Religious fundamentalism and fanaticism substantially influencing state policies leading to conflict;

– Use of religion directly to seek political power;

– Religious conflicts initiated and used by outside powers to destabilize countries.[3]

The list illustrates the complexity of the issues involved and one can easily identify a combination of a number of elements outlined above operative in many societies today where religion has become a component of a conflict situation, or where conflict is initiated and carried out in the name of religion.

Our purpose, however, is not to go into the question of the role of religious factors in conflict situations, but to ask what role religions can play in promoting unity and harmony. We would seek to answer this question along two lines. First, in terms of the self-understanding of religions themselves and second, in respect of their role in society.

Towards a new self-understanding of Religions

Religions, without exception, have what one might call a "home-base". All of them have developed in a given period of history in specific cultural,

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3. Quoted here from: S. Wesly Ariarajah, "New Forms of Religious Conciousness and Rise of Fundamentalism" in : *W.S.C.F. Journal*, December 1986, p. 7.

historical and spiritual setting. Each one of them, therefore, have a specificity that belongs to itself. Thus Islam and Buddhism, Judaism and Hinduism, Christianity and Shinto are very different, not only in their philosophical mode of thinking but in the way they have evolved the cultic and cultural elements that sustain the people in their religious life. There are of course definite affinities between Judaism – Christianity and Islam which have come out of the semitic culture, and Hinduism - Buddhism - Confucianism and Tao that have come out of the Asian culture. There are, however, particularities that separate also religions that come out of the same cultural milieu. Thus while Judaism and Christianity have very close associations, the very proximity and affinity requires them to sharpen the matters that separate them.

The road to peace and harmony between religions, therefore, lies in their willingness to redefine themselves in the light of the pressures to live in pluralist societies that has been forced on them by the forces of modernity.

The doctrinal exclusivism and the understanding of 'Community' as that which brings together those who subscribe to a particular faith has come under much pressure. The usefulness of religions to the contemporary world lies in their ability to deal with this issue.

There are a number of voices today that call for a fundamental reassessment of the concept of community with which religions have lived for centuries. S. K. L. Seshagiri Rao calls for a radical restatement of traditional doctrines to deal with plurality :

Traditional theology, developed in religious isolation, has now become inadequate, if not obsolete; it does not permit the different religious traditions to live side by side in friendly cooperation. Religious conflict has become tragic and pointless; no single religious tradition can expect to displace all other religions. As far as we can see, human community will continue to be religiously pluralistic. Each religion should come to terms with this fact, and attempt to do justice to the religious experience of mankind as a whole. By a deep and thorough investigation of its respective heritage, each tradition should open up a new spiritual horizon hospitable to the faiths of other people. The future usefulness

of any religious tradition depends on its ability to cooperate with other traditions.[4]

Wilfred Cantwell Smith takes this concern much further and argues for an understanding of the whole of the religious life of humankind as one common history where each religious tradition would be seen as 'strands' within a common history. He sees the need for a "world theology" where each religious tradition's explication and expression of the faith is done in ways that takes full account of the other. Similar concern is expressed by Kenneth Cragg when he calls for a theology in cross-reference in his recent volume of *The Christ and the Faiths.* Cragg sees no way one can do Christian theology today without being "attentive" to the faith of the neighbours.

The whole concern for the reinterpretation of theology in relationship to others also has to do with the understanding of mission over which there has been, and continues to be, much mutual misunderstanding and suspicion among religions. Without having to reopen the whole discussion on conversion and its meaning, one should point out that each religion today needs to look at the purpose and goals of mission in a pluralist society. Conversions there would always be – for who can control the spirit of the human to want to change? Missions there would always be – for who can prevent the human spirit from sharing, rejoicing and crying out? But conversions, missions, institutional protections that have been developed in another age and for another purpose have come under much pressure in the pluralist societies. Religions have to learn to deal with them if they seek to play a role of reconciliation and peace in society.

For reconciliation and harmony today do not simply mean respect and tolerance. They have to do with a way of life in which there has to be an altered notion of religious identity, a creative approach to plurality and a radical redefinition of a faith in relation to other faiths. Self–transformation and reconceptualization of religions is an essential prerequisite for them to play any meaningful and creative role in the search for unity and harmony in the nation. Assuming that this would be forthcoming one could now consider what role religion can play in society in the search for unity.

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4. K.L. Seshagiri Rao, "Human Community and Religious Pluralism : A Hindu Perspetive" in : C.D. Jathanna (Ed.), *Dialogue in Community*, The Karnataka Theological Research Institute, Mangalore, 1982, p. 162.

The Role of Religion in the Search for Unity

Unfortunately there are too many who believe that if only religions would preach more peace and reconciliation and appeal to the "higher instincts" of persons there would be greater peace in society. There is some truth in this concern and we should return to this at a later stage. But no religion can serve a useful purpose in society if it says "peace, peace" when there is no peace – as Prophet Jeremiah so bitingly puts it in Ch. 8. One of the fundamental roles of religion in any society is to be so present as to expose the dehumanizing aspects of society. The righteous society is one where unrighteousness is easily recognized and condemned. Religion in many societies has not been able to function in this way because of its own compromise with power and privilege. Where religion is co-opted by the powers that be, or where the religious institutions and leadership have themselves become protective of their own interests, religion can have no role to play in the search for unity and harmony. "Seek righteousness and correct oppression," can still be the role of religion in a society, but this can only be done where selfishness and self-preservation are no longer the primary motivation of religions. It is an ironical fact that not only humans, but also religions can have "life", only if they are prepared to lose it.

The role religion needs to play in society in the search for justice and peace cannot be overemphasized, for at the root of much of the conflict lies the gross injustices that plague our societies. There is, however, also a positive role that religion should play in the search for unity and harmony that is not emphasized enough, namely, the creation of the spiritual climate that violates against disharmony and conflict.

More and more people feel today that all religions should move away from the preoccupation with institutions and doctrines to the creation of a climate of conversation and reconciliation. Surely the greatest need today in societies that are in societies that are in conflict is for persons to meet, to talk, to understand, to appreciate and to relate. How much harm has happened because of prejudice, misunderstanding and mutual suspicion! Is it not important for the Muslim to know the Hindu also as a deeply devoted and "god-fearing" person? Is it not essential that the Hindu to discover the Muslim to be a person who under God is keen to seek peace with all. Is it not crucial that the Hindu and Muslim discover the Christian not as someone who is out to convert them but as someone who can care for them even as they are? Is there not a need today for all of them to learn

that truth lies beyond all their reach, and that they need each other in the human pilgrimage? The biggest role religion can play today in the search for unity and harmony is to enable this meeting and dialogue among peoples of faiths and also with those who profess no specific faith.   There is of course the ongoing meeting in life – in the school, the factory, in socio-political life. But can religions today make this meeting a "conscious" meeting so that people also discover each other in their respective faiths ?

Such a meeting between peoples of different faiths . cannot yield much fruit unless it is also supported by highlighting aspects of religious teaching that promote dialoque and community.   Religions today have the responsibility to seek to lift up the reconciling potential, the community building aspects and relational elements in their teaching which would give a faith orientation to people to deal with plurality.   This wold help them to respect minorities and other ways of understanding and relating to ultimate reality. If the religious sentiment can be so organized to mobilize the sectarian self–understanding of life in community, it should also be possible, by evoking other symbols and other passions, to create an atmosphere where the call for and harmony will not be so out of place as it has often been in the past. Religions can only vainly hope to appeal for peace and harmony during actual conflicts if they have not attempted to create a climate of reconciliation and harmony before conflicts come about.   Little wonder that much of the appeal for peace from religious leaders lacks credibility in many conflict situations today.

Perhaps the time has come to 'institutionalize' the reconciling potential of religion as well.   Interfaith councils, mnltifaith fellowships of religious leaders, peace education, studies in peaceful methods of conflict-resolution, education for justice and peace, exposure to each other's prayer and spiritual practices etc., etc., may have to be the new "institutions" that supplement the institutions that brought education, healing and service to communities. Peace does not come about by wishing it; we have to be *peace-makers*.   One has to work for and build peace, and strive to preserve it.