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Religious Being and Human Becoming*

When we study the record of past disputes in religion, we cannot avoid the conclusion that our ideas are time-bound. What is of ultimate significance is the spirit or, theologically speaking, the Spirit, which moves us at a particular moment in time. These points can be briefly illustrated by reference to our idea of religion itself and our conceptions of religious institutions. At the same time, however, we need guidelines and ways of identifying the Spirit in our midst. If every idea is just as good as every other, regardless of the context, then we might just as well give up arguing and sit in silence. Indeed, at a conference full of people eager to speak, this might be a welcome change of pace. But silence, too, is only significant in relation to what comes before and after. Silence when we should bear witness and speak out is a sin of omission. Silence while we sift the profundity of what has been said is a prerequisite to personal appropriation of the truth. Our task is to reflect on what must be said concerning "Religions and Man", if we are to arrive at the truth for our time that is suggested by this topic.

In the twentieth century, influenced by the thought of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, interpretations of religion are as often moved by suspicion as by unquestioning faith. The arrival of a new missionary in a foreign country may well be regarded as bad news, not good. The people of that country wait to see what the newcomer has to offer before making a judgment. Today we view the apostles of Marx and Freud with the same suspicion. There is no position, no matter how "scientific" it claims to be, which can claim to be universally valid for all time.

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This point is especially true of religion. Even the word 'religion' reflects a western, Christian perspective, focussing on personal faith or institutional identities. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, by his writing, has done much to alert us to the nuances of these terms. But even he is suspect, as we see when we try to translate his ideas into a Hindu context. How do we understand the term 'person' then? Do we mean individual souls in this present existence, some cosmic spirit, or what? Hindu sages teach us to look for spirituality rather than personal piety. Smith's expertise is initially as an interpreter of Islam. But even there his Protestant individualism affects how he views the data. For Islam stresses much more the submission of the whole community to the will of Allah, as revealed in the Qur'an, and thus shifts the emphasis onto the institutional forms of faith, which Smith tends to regard as wholly human, secondary expressions.¹ Both Protestant and Muslim here accept a great divide between divine transcendence and human achievement. To the extent that 'religion' means human achievement, for them it is theologically suspect. Yet Catholic spirituality, nourished by the doctrine of incarnation, here converges more with the Hindu, and acknowledges some grace in religious activities. There is thus no consensus either within or across traditions, concerning religion.

We sense something of the animus behind suspicion of religion, when we consider contemporary reactions to the other word in the conference title—'man'. What is said of 'man' in the traditions often seems to today's educated women to mean that they belong forever only as second-class citizens. For a man to say that by the word 'man' he means both male and female is not enough. What is at issue is not the word but a long history of subordination and domination. Our terms have symbolic as well as literal significance. All too often, in our history, our preferred images of religion and humanity have been associated with the domination of one set of people by another. It was Nietzsche who reminded us that the lion may very well want the lamb to think of him as just another creature. But the lamb would be very unwise to forget their differences, especially just before supper.

Yet we are no further ahead if we drop the idea of religion altogether. The story of modern secular movements, such as Marxism,

1. See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief*, (Princeton, New Jersey, 1979,) Princeton University Press, pp. 14, 48, 167.

is just as much a story of domination and alienation, with a new class of bosses using a new set of code-words. The religious dimension remains among these movements, even when they claim to be anti-religious. They have their saints, their holy days, their myths and rituals, their scriptures and their commentaries, and a spiritual vision of a finer life, which calls them to become missionaries around the globe. Instead of portraying each such movement in partisan terms, comparing our best efforts with others' worst, we have to learn from each other. We have to see why others regard our news as bad, but theirs as good, and *vice versa*. We have to respect the spiritual dimension in all movements concerned with human becoming. Only through their juxtaposition do we learn the truth for our times.

The juxtaposition of competing claims and interplay of contrasting ideas of human becoming is our only way to religious truth, when so many voices claim such absolute authority for themselves. Instead of declarative pronouncements from mountain tops, what we experience is the dialectical development of ideas which, taken alone, tend to be half truths. For example, Christian theology has rightly stressed personal relationship as the key to transcendence. Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and Christian theistic traditions have all heightened our respect for human beings by seeing them as images of a divine personality. Yet a one-sided emphasis on individual development, through personal relationships, is destructive, even of the personalities involved. God becomes a domineering heavenly patriarch, whose love for humanity is suspect. And human beings in their turn act as little gods in relation to their environment. As Hindu theology reminds us, the personal lord is a destroyer as well as a creator, and very often we deserve to be destroyed. A true estimation of personal worth requires a transpersonal backdrop, if we are to appreciate its significance. In Tillich's terms, we need to allow for the God above the 'God' of our different theologies, if we would hear the truth which makes us free to be ourselves, as well as the truth which liberate. us from our petty egotism.

The concept of dialectical development means more than a friendly chat among intellectuals, out of which we hope some pleasant things may come. It contains within it the idea of co-implication. If I make a statement about personal relationship, for example, I already imply something about impersonal existence. If, with Archbishop William Temple, I declare Christianity to be the most materialistic of world

religions, I imply something at the same time about spiritual affirmations. In terms used by Raimundo Panikkar, dialectical thinking attends both to the 'logos' of the rational self and to the 'mythos' of the imaginative soul.² When a logical statement becomes too one-sided, it directs us to the half-truth buried in the opposite statement. When statement-making turns us into too intellectual an existence, the need for action draws us into rediscovery of religious truth.

Dialectical thinking looks at flat declarations about profound concerns and acknowledges both what is said and what is implied. Somehow we need sharpened images and clear statements to hold our attention and engage our emotions. But once involved, we tend to overstate our case. Often only confrontation with the spiritual concerns of others brings us back to the whole truth. For an example from the history of religions, consider the Hindu and Buddhist ideal of *ahimsa*. It puts to shame a Christian vision of love which extends only to fellow human beings. At the same time, we note that Mahatma Gandhi modified his conception of *ahimsa*, partly as a result of his exposure to western social activism. He gave it a more political, though still spiritual, connotation than it had before. From the history of Christian missions in past centuries, we realize that many missionaries thought too exclusively in terms of bringing people to accept specific clauses in their creed. But they also set about building hospitals and schools and, in the long run, these gave more eloquent testimony to belief in the Incarnation than doctrines based on outmoded schools of western philosophy.

The point is that human being is a becoming that needs the dialectical thrust of true religion. By 'religion' here is meant, not just the elevation of individual souls or certain kinds of social organizations but inspirational movements cutting across personal and party lines, driven by the alienation and drawn by the reconciliation and liberation, which we all know and dream of. At times we are alienated from ourselves. We need to be drawn out by stories of the lives of the saints. Good news means an identity which throbs with the heartbeat of the universe. But then we need to return to our-

2. See Raimundo Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*, (Paulist Press, New York, 1979), pp. 4-5.

selves, to affirm the specific creature that we may become. And this may involve for a time alienation from others and even from the traditions in which we were brought up. We do not become ourselves by staying with what our parents expected of us. But neither can we become ourselves by pretending that we had no ancestors. In Christian terms, true religion is the present interplay between traditional faith and transcendent hope, as this is expressed in genuine love and justice for all.

A dialectical understanding of tradition allows us to affirm our past, without slavishly imitating those who have gone before. Westerners do not discover Hindu spirituality by spinning cotton in downtown New York. Indians do not absorb the best of British education by affecting the Oxford accent in New Delhi. Tradition has liberating, religious meaning only as it gives shape to transcendent hope. Classically in religion this move has been thought to be away from this world, into the timeless bliss of eternity. Originally, and increasingly in this century, the major world religions have affirmed a this-worldly core. In theologies of liberation especially, transcendence seems more 'horizontal' than 'vertical'.³ The thrust is towards a new future for all humanity, rather than heavenly peace for a favoured few. The important point in common, for classical and contemporary religious thinking, is confidence in a qualitatively different time-frame from that of our present experience of domination, alienation and despair. The agenda which counts is that of the coming Kingdom of God, to use biblical terms, or the realization of Nirvana, or whatever the vision may be.

Tradition lives in religion as the tradition of promise. The promise takes shape for us as we challenge in our day any acquiescence in a world that gives misery the last word. Any analysis of our present discontents implies already some promise of transcendence. That such transcendence is possible we know from the lives of the saints who have shaped our traditions. They have not been perfect. Many proved impossible to live with. But each in his or her way responded creatively to the challenge of a particular time by expressing afresh the Good News attested by those who had gone before. Such witnesses

3. For a summary of current European thinking on this topic see Charles Davis, *Theology and Political Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980, the Hulsean Lectures for 1978.

are valuable precisely because they do not repeat the same message in the same words, year after year. What is the same however is the common hope and the sense of a presence that, not only makes that hope seem feasible, but demands that we begin to realize it now.

The challenges of our time are commonly mentioned by reference to such movements as Marxism, secularism and pluralism. Marxism is powerful, not because Lenin and Mao adapted it to the needs of Russia and China, but because, more than most contemporary philosophies, it faces the challenge of the industrial revolution. It confronts us with the promise of an end to starvation and economic indignity, through the distribution of the benefits of technology. Secularism appeals to us through one instance of that technology: television and films. In Sanskrit terms, it is an updated version of our age-old preoccupation with *artha* and *kama*. Pluralism appeals to most intellectuals as the only reasonable stance, in a world which acknowledges the right to exist of so many different philosophies and cultures.

A dialectical reading of such movements attends to what is implied, as well as what is said to us, by their exponents. It both affirms and negates each in turn. In other words this is to acknowledge the witness but deny the '-ism.' Marx had important things to say to people in the industrial age, but we should not make an absolute system out of his philosophy; and so on. This is fair enough, provided that we recognize that others may say to us: Jesus, or Muhammad, or Sankara, had important things to say to people in his time, but we should not make an absolute system out of Christianity, or Islam, or Advaita Vedanta. If we affirm the importance of secular concerns, but reject secularism, do we also acknowledge religious priorities, without making an '-ism' out of otherworldliness? These, however, are only clever debater's points, unless they form part of a dialectic imbued with the spirit of true religion, that is an uncompromising commitment to truth, freedom, love and justice.

What bothers many with regard to religious pluralism is the suspicion that it entails utter relativism and a kind of subjectivism that

is destructive of faith.⁴ Far from expressing a democracy of the spirit, appropriate to a post-totalitarian society, it marks the death of the absolute place of spiritual concerns in our lives. This is a large topic, indeed the theme of the whole 1981-'82 series of lectures at the Boston University Institute for Philosophy of Religion. We have time for only a few short comments.

Firstly, what is absolute in the Christian view is a plurality of individual existences under God. Belief in the resurrection of the body means, among other things, that our transcendent hope incorporates our individual destinies. In the Hebraic view of personality, such individuality applies, not to private citizens as such, but to different peoples. Christianity transcends the tribalism inherent in this perspective, but reaffirms the insight that truth is always incarnate. This means that what is real is, not the lowest common denominator of our absent-mindedness, but the fleshed out nodal points of our interpersonal relationships. We know and are known in our fullness, including our frailty and alienation. We do not subtract that in us which is divine from the mass of our condemned existence. For, in isolation, nothing in us is divine. Rather, the mystery of salvation is that somehow all that is valuable in each individual is transformed. In the history of religions, this presupposes that each body faith has its place in God's providence. Contrary to what some theologians have supposed, God did not give up on the Jews, when he commissioned Paul to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. Nor can we imagine that God was absent from India and the rest of the world, while Jesus preached in Galilee. Any adequate theology of religions must allow for this fact.

Secondly, systems of ideas or systems of rules, including creeds and rituals, are not in themselves absolute. Some system is necessary to our thinking and collective behaviour. But no particular system is true for all time. What abides is the ongoing life, which includes such systems as part of tradition, but transforms these in view of the transcendent hope that characterizes living faith. What this means

4. The classic protestant statement on this is Ernst Troeltsch's 1901 lectures *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, tr. David Reid, John Knox Press, Richmond, Virginia, 1971. On this see George Rupp, *Christologies and Cultures*, Mouton, The Hague, 1974, pp. 219-229.

for our encounters at particular points in time, as we saw with reference to the practice of *ahimsa*, is that we both incorporate and adapt the insights of our ancestors and the wisdom of other traditions. This leads me to my third and last point.

What marks a dialectical development as truly religious is the present agenda set by the interplay of traditional faith and transcendent hope. People unmindful of their past, who are without a living hope, are at the mercy of circumstances. What enters their thinking are only the conditions catalogued for us by social scientists - present facts and patterns of behaviour. By contrast, the saints in all the traditions have marched to the beat of a different drummer. Their agenda has been set by a vision which transcends and transforms present situations. As such, they have been on the borderline of insanity, if by sanity is meant conformity to prevailing norms. But where the mentally ill become increasingly obsessed with themselves — if they are political or religious leaders, taking their followers with them to destruction, as in Jonestown — by contrast, the abnormality of the saints is that they are ahead of their times. They are governed by a moral vision which others increasingly can share.

What matters is not the details of a particular vision. Gandhi may well have been wrong about industrialization. Saint Paul was certainly wrong about the timing of the end of the world. What matters is the core of moral principle and spirit of the promise which such leaders share. What matters, in Christian terms, is the creative and recreative impact of the love and justice imbuing the religious movements of our times. Where everything else may be relative, these principles are absolute. Leading us, as they do, on the path to ultimate truth and freedom, they consistently renew among us the Good News for all humanity. The sign that this indeed is where we encounter absolute power is the fact that, even if the individual leaders are martyred, the spirit lives on in the lives of their followers.

Notice in closing that saints do not live in isolation. Even a Ramana Maharshi must have his sacred mountain and his ashram to become what he is for us. Insight into the importance of such structures is what we gain especially from the social scientists. Dialectical materialists have forced one-sided spiritualists to acknowledge the conditions necessary to the life of any movement. Too often in religion

we have forgotten that truth must be incarnate, that the promise is of a new earth as well as a new heaven. But once we have built our hospitals and schools, our factories and homes, we have accomplished nothing, unless from the beginning we have also built into the situation the principles governing the communities in question. Whether it is idealist or materialist, dialectical thinking drives us to make explicit all the factors implicit in the realization of our ultimate hope. Only through the interplay of all these dimensions of truly religious being is the story of our human becoming worth declaring to generations yet unborn.

If we apply the emphases on individual personality and dialectical thinking to the theme of Religions and Man, we are left, I think, with this insight: true religion directs us to become what we may as individuals, individual persons and individual communions and communities. This becoming is a process in which each individual exists only in relation to others. Truth requires us to transcend the partial perspectives of our traditions, not by repudiating these, but by transforming our separate ways in the light of our knowledge of each other. This knowledge gives us hope because it is rooted in the principles of truth, freedom, love and justice, expressed by successive generations, in the lives of saints and their supporters. The vision of this hope may be worldly or otherworldly, but is religiously significant only if it brings Good News to all humanity. It challenges each generation to renew the agendas by which we realize the best, not the worst, in each of us.