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Religion and Social Change: Some Basic Patterns

Organized religion has often a predilection for the *status quo* and stands in the way of a healthy transformation of outmoded social structures. On the other hand, religion provides the most potent motivation for transforming society in accordance with the principles and ideals that define the ultimate concerns of man as a social being. But this religious orientation towards social change has assumed different approaches. Here I shall present a few basic patterns of the relationship of religion to social structures, their preservation, development and transformation.

1. Secularization Movement

The first pattern of approach to the relation between religion and social change is to treat of religion as a passing phenomenon pertaining to the infancy of the human race and to deny it any significant role in the social process once humanity has come of age. This approach is associated, chiefly with Auguste Comte who proposed his famous law of three stages, the primitive explanations of the universe in terms of myth and magic, followed by the religio-philosophical stage, and culminating in the stage of the all-sufficient scientific explanation. People often took it for granted that religion and science were irreconcilable. Karl Marx who considered religion as a product of alienation and a form of false consciousness predicted that religion would disappear when people were freed from economic oppression and other forms of dehumanization and gained a realistic understanding of social life. Max Weber, more than any other sociologist, had insisted that religion is the only power that enables people to redefine the meaning of their life and that it has, therefore, enormous potential for radical social change. Yet, even he tended to confirm the fear expressed by several sociologists that the modern world dominated by technology and bureaucracy may shut out religion and create an iron

age society guided by the sole pragmatic concerns of efficiency and bodily comfort.

Similarly, sociologists who look upon religion in terms of the functions it performs in society see a decline and an eventual disappearance of religion itself. Today with the advance of science, technology and physical sciences, the churches, mosques and temples seem to be confining their activities to increasingly fewer areas of life. Church attendance is on the decline especially in the developed countries. The roles and functions of religious personnel have become increasingly restricted and rather marginal to society. Services such as education, medical care of the sick and counselling of the disturbed, in all of which the church was a pioneer and played a leading role in the past, are today increasingly taken over by specialist professions. So organized religion appears to be the concern exclusively of the committed few.

But religion itself has not disappeared. In spite of theories predicting the disappearance of religion, in this last quarter of the twentieth century it has become obvious to many that religion in one form or another is an abiding human phenomenon. As Emile Durkheim has said, "There is something eternal in religion, which is destined to survive all particular symbols in which religious thought has successively enveloped itself."¹ Since historically religion has been connected with the production of culture and science it cannot be reduced to mere ideology; it is inevitable that men should encounter the transcendent in their lives and seek to surrender themselves to it. Durkheim, who regarded himself as an atheist, held that the object of religious experience and worship, while it transcended the individual did not transcend the human community as a whole, and that it was society's encounter with its own roots, the social matrix out of which people came to be. Since he made a radical distinction between the sacred and the secular, he held that because traditional religion no longer corresponded to the social experience of today, the society resulting from the present transitional period would create its own religious experience and religious symbols. But today we may challenge this radical distinction and opposition between the sacred and the secular.

1. Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. (New York : 1965), p. 474.

2. Religion as the Source of Alienation

There is an enduring tension between religion and sociology. Peter Berger says: "The basic intellectual thrust of sociology as a field is fundamentally destructive. It is debunking, it is irreverent, it is distrustful—in the fullest sense of the word—in that it mistrusts the facades of human life, including the pretensions of human ideologues, thought systems, beliefs. . . Religion, on the other hand, in its very essence is trust. . . I think there are very few areas of human life which are as prone to dishonesty and illusion as the religious enterprise."² There is a certain diversity in the approach to sociology itself and it affects the perception of the role of religion in social change. For Peter Berger and Western sociologists in general society is simply the product of collective human activity, the sum total of three movements of individuals: externalization, objectification and internalization.³ In the Western social perception there is a certain duality in the heart of social experience: The individual perceives the social world as an objective reality external to himself, with which the internal structure of the subject has to come to terms. There is dialectical tension between one's identity subjectively appropriated, and the role and place assigned to one in the outside world. There is a certain duplication of consciousness between its socialized and non-socialized components. Internalization of the external identity entails self-objectivation, and also the possibility of estranging one part of consciousness as against the rest, an internal confrontation between socialized and non-socialized components of self, corresponding to the external confrontation between society and the individual. When this confrontation is not resolved by the recollection that both the world and the self are products of one's own activity, it leads to alienation which is the process whereby the dialectical relationship between the individual and his world is lost to consciousness.⁴

Peter Berger may be taken as a typical representative of this Western sociological approach. According to him religion has an intrinsic tendency to legitimate alienation. He says: "Both primitive and infantile consciousness apprehends the socio-cultural world in

2. Peter Berger, "The Pluralistic Situation and the Coming Dialogue between the World Religions," *Buddhist-Christian Studies I* (1981), p. 31.

3. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*. (Doubleday Anchor Books, 1969), p. 81.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-85.

essentially alienated terms—as facticity, necessity, fate.” One of the essential qualities of the sacred, as encountered in “religious experience” is otherness, which is at the heart of religious awe and dread of, and at the same time absolute dependence on the Mystery. “Whatever else the constellations of the sacred may be ‘ultimately’, empirically they are products of human activity and human significance . . . The ‘objectivity’ of religious meanings is produced objectivity . . . It follows that insofar as these meanings imply an overwhelming sense of otherness, they may be described as alienated projections.” Berger’s conclusion is “that the historical part of religion in the world-building and world-maintaining enterprises of man is in large measure due to the alienating power inherent in religion.”⁵

Most guilty in creating this alienation, according to Berger, is the Catholic Christianity of Europe: “The Catholic lives in a world in which the sacred is mediated to him through a variety of channels—the sacraments of the church, the intercession of the saints, the recurring eruption of the ‘supernatural’ in miracles—a vast continuity of being between the seen and the unseen.”⁶ But Berger does not identify religion with alienation. In fact he recognizes also a certain de-alienating function of religion as in Judaism of the Old Testament and in Protestant Christianity. In sharp opposition to the divine-human continuum that characterized the religious faith of surrounding cultures in the Near East, Judaism radically transcendentalized God, in the process relativizing the whole social order showing that its institutions are in the face of God nothing but human works, devoid of inherent sanctity or immortality.⁷ Christianity with its emphasis on incarnation, the entire host of angels and saints culminating in the glorification of Mary represented a retrogressive step in terms of the secularizing motifs of Old Testament religion.⁸ But Protestantism liberated man from myth, mystery and magic retaining only a narrow channel of relationship to the sacred, called God’s Word, which also could easily be sunk into implausibility. Thereby the social reality “became amenable to the systematic, rational penetration both in

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 86-89.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

thought and in activity, which we associate with modern science and technology.”⁹

In this sociological perspective the real function of religion towards society is to achieve de-alienation by removing the “sacred canopy” created by myth, mystery and magic and allow man to construct his own social world on purely rational grounds. In fact the Christian Church has unconsciously contributed to the secularization of society in history. By insisting on an institutional specialization of religion instead of its diffusion through activities and symbols into the whole social fabric of man, the Church concentrated the religious activities and symbols in one institutional sphere, *ipso facto* defining the rest of society as “the world” as a profane realm at least relatively removed from the jurisdiction of the sacred. The logical development of this is seen in the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, which in a way gives a theological legitimation to the autonomy of the secular world. Berger and other sociologists assume that in the scientific outlook of the modern world “the religious legitimations of the world have lost their plausibility not only for a few intellectuals and other marginal individuals but for broad masses of entire societies.”¹⁰ Particularly the Christian theodicy of suffering and the secularized soteriologies are said to have lost their appeal and have, consequently, “radically de-alienated and ‘humanized’ social reality.”¹¹ In Berger’s opinion while in the public sphere religion continues only as a matter of ideological rhetoric, it has reappeared in the private lives of people as a legitimation of the family, a legitimating complex voluntarily adopted by individuals, lacking, however, in common binding quality and hence incapable of fulfilling the classical task of religion, that of contributing a common world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning binding on everybody.”¹²

A Word of Criticism: This analysis of religion as a mere social function, a sacred canopy created purely by human activity is obviously reductionistic. Berger and those who follow his manner of thinking, insist that if there is religion it must conform completely to their empirical method. They thereby implicitly deny a place for religion at the very outset. The empirical method which is concerned with

9. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 133-34.

the horizontal relationship of phenomena is incapable of dealing directly with religion which explores the vertical link of the world with the transcendental Reality. When sociologists proceed to explain the origin of religions and cults they are no longer within their proper sphere of competence and method, but assuming the role of philosophers often without a clearly conceived methodology for it. What Durkheim and Max Weber presented are not scientific conclusions but merely their speculations.

When Berger states: "Whatever may be the 'ultimate' merits of religious explanations of the universe at large, their empirical tendency has been to falsify man's consciousness of that part of the universe shaped by his own activity, namely, the socio-cultural world,"¹³ he violates even the integrity of the empirical method. What an empirical examination of social data reveals is not simply what man has shaped by his activity, but also what he has recognized and accepted as the basically given, the transcendental meaning of truth and goodness which are the very suppositions of his conscious activity. Man's empirical activity is not purely seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting like the animals. His is rational experience and it can be understood only in the context of his search for ultimate meaning, boundless truth and infinite goodness. Hence, even empirically the Transcendent is the horizon of human existence both individual and social.

Berger's treatment of the history of religions is, to say the least, rather naive. In no tradition was religion regarded as something imposed on society from the outside, as a sort of canopy. Religion was very much a human phenomenon representing the transcendental concerns of man and constantly interacting with the this-worldly and social aspects of his life: Just as religion influenced social structures, socio-political and cultural concerns to a great extent shaped religion. The prophets of the Old Testament in affirming the absolute transcendence of Yahweh were not exactly secularists, as Berger claims, leaving people to themselves to manage their secular and social affairs according to pure reason, but assertive theocrats affirming the right of God to decide and decree every aspect of man's individual and social life. A good part of the religious life of the Israelites was shaped in socio-political interaction with their neighbours. Hebrews took over the

13. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

agricultural celebrations of the earlier Palestinian settlers and transformed them into religious memorials of their own legendary past. Their opposition to the cult of images and especially the worship of the Golden Calf can be explained to a great extent by their political opposition to their neighbours and even to their own fellow Israelites of the Northern Kingdom. Similarly, to explain the sixteen centuries of European Christianity as mere mythification and mystification is to ignore completely the centuries long sincere effort of theologians, philosophers and church leaders to make the Christian faith relevant to the philosophical, cultural and socio-political realities of the Western world without at the same time compromising the absolute transcendence of the Creator of all things. Any honest student of European history knows that the Protestant move to secularism was not a purely rational adventure of de-alienation, but a daring attempt to bring religion to a compromise with the socio-political realities of the particular countries concerned.

3. Theological Reductionism

Equally reductionistic is the approach of theologians and religious leaders to preserve intact the socio-cultural expressions of religious faith in a bygone age in spite of the ever changing circumstances of the human society. Often faith is confused with its particular belief expressions and traditions. Faith is the obedient acceptance of the transcendent Good as the infinite truth-object of the intellect and the final goal and meaning of all human strivings. Beliefs, on the other hand, are particular expressions and instances perceived as guaranteed for their truth value by the authority of the transcendent Good. When those beliefs go to form a sort of integrated system, a socio-cultural framework invested with religious authority, we have a religious tradition. Beliefs and traditions are time-bound and socio-culturally conditioned in their meaning and relevance and cannot, therefore, be absolutized. But often well intentioned religious leaders tend to absolutize them and identify them with faith itself. Thus Schleiermacher who tried to pioneer a theology of the Christian mission to the non-Christian world, thought that the task of the Christian missionary was to preach and propagate the values of European culture, which in his opinion was the best expression of Christian faith. He did not realize the dangers of cultural and political imperialism this outlook on evangelization involved.

For long centuries Europe was identified with Christendom, since the Muslims were far away on the eastern and southern boundaries and there were only a few Jews scattered among the Christians here and there and they did not present any threat to the Christian hegemony. Hence the main body of Christians had no real understanding of the value and salvific role of world religions like Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism that provided inspiration and founded the religious faith of more than four-fifths of the human race. Only in very recent times did the Christian Church become aware of these other religious traditions; even today its impressions concerning them are rather naive, and the official Church pronouncements on them are over-cautious and outdated by at least twenty-five years behind actual scholarship! This is mainly owing to the fact that Christians, and especially ecclesiastical authorities, identified Christian faith with its socio-cultural expressions in Europe and America.

The same kind of backwardness is seen in the matter of coming to terms with modernity. As we have noted already, the modern man has not lost his religious values, but only his faith in organized religion and its socio-cultural structures. He is looking for more appropriate expressions of his deepest concerns and of his faith in transcendent Reality in the various aspects and spheres of the socio-cultural and political fields. The great majority of the ecclesiastical leaders who consider themselves custodians of the past look upon signs of modernity as apostasy of religion. Hardly fifteen per cent of bishops as well as of the clergy and laity is willing to acknowledge that the old order of things cannot be brought back and so one must look to the future with optimism and trust in the Providence of God. The rest are frantically endeavouring to bolster up institutions and structures and organizations that have lost their relevance and appeal for the modern man. In this preoccupation to maintain the past structures at all costs they become fund-raisers and organizers and, paradoxically, turn out to be less and less effective in communicating the religious message itself, since they cannot find time to proclaim the Gospel where it is most relevant and most needed.

Christ condemned the scribes and the pharisees for their failure to live up to the Law they assiduously studied, and so he instructed the people: Do as they tell you, but not as they do. Today the reverse appears to be the case; the Church leaders who are conscientious people and try to be faithful to the Gospel may, in fact, be

prisoners of some outdated formulations of it. One such example could be the ecclesiastical prohibition for the clergy and the religious to engage in politics, which is creating conflicts and problems all over the world. One priest who got elected to the legislature of his State against the wishes of his bishop asks: "How can I be faithful as a priest to Christ if I restrict my ministry according to the wishes of the bishop to the fifteen Catholic families of my small parish and refuse to serve the one hundred and twenty villages and the thousands of poor people in them who chose me as their overall leader?" Another priest working in a fishermen's village considered it his duty to conscientize the people about their legitimate rights against the exploitative merchants' group and launch a vigorous fight against age-old traditions of injustice, though in the opinion of his bishop he thereby destroyed the peace of the whole locality and the well-established government of the diocese. Yet another case involved a priest who was forced to abandon his ministry on account of his revolutionary activities among the masses; but he found that the only alternative would be for him to restrict himself to saying the Mass and conducting the devotions in his church and to leave the people in their struggle for their legitimate rights to the exploitative leadership of the Marxists who had only the good of their party at heart. Perhaps the right reaction to the ecclesiastical authorities in this context seems to be: "Do not attend to what they are saying. See what they are doing!" The Pope and the bishops may be repeating the old disciplinary rules. But they cannot be insensitive to the socio-political realities of today in which alone the living Word of God can really be encountered. For example, everyone knows that Pope John Paul II and the bishops of Poland are deeply involved in the politics of Poland!

Religion and the socio-political structures of humanity cannot be separated into airtight compartments. They are not even dialectically opposed. They are complementary aspects of one human existence. At no time was the principle of faith preached as an abstract doctrine. In the life and preaching of Christ the Father's saving will was announced in response to the problems of the multi-married Samaritan woman, the tears of a widow who had lost her only son, the embarrassment of a couple at Cana when wine ran short at their wedding feast, the impossible situation of a tax-collector who did not see a way out from his path of sin, the tears of a repentant sinner, the helplessness of a man born blind and of a paralytic waiting on the bank of a

miraculous pool for thirty-eight years for a cure, and such other actual social situations. The socio-economic and political situations, on the other hand, were not asking for satisfaction of certain immediate needs in terms of food, prestige and power, but demanded an affirmation of the ultimate worth of the children of God involved in such situations. Hence real social change can be achieved only by taking into account the deeper implications of the human situation, and faith can be embraced by human beings only when it is shown to be relevant to the total human context.

4. The Monistic Sociology of India

In the West not only philosophy which was considered the humble handmaid of theology, but even manifestly human sciences like psychology, anthropology, politics and sociology had to struggle for a long time to gain their freedom from ecclesiastical tutelage and practise the legitimate autonomy of their methods and procedures. The Church had such an all-embracing grip on all aspects of people's lives, and theology had elaborated its faith conclusions such minutest detail that very little room was left for the human sciences to develop on their own. Even evolutionary trends in biology and cosmology were frowned upon as being opposed to the static view of things presented by divine Revelation. Hence once they gained their autonomy by a sort of open rebellion these human sciences, especially sociology and politics, continue to evince a certain anti-ecclesiastical and even anti-religious interest.

In the East, on the other hand, religion did not exert such a rigid control over the lives of people. David G. Mandelbaum says in this context: "To begin with, a villager finds in religion his (or her) principal opportunity for personal choice. Much in his career is quite tightly prescribed, but he does have some option about which deity to single out for special devotion, how to express that devotion, and which personal mentor to select. Narrow though this choice may seem to an outside observer, religion does afford the villager a wide range of choice than is easily available elsewhere. Religion is generally seen as a benign field of conduct. So long as a person shows the recognized signs of behaving religiously, others give at least conditional approval to what he does."¹⁴

14. David G. Mandelbaum, *Society in India II: Change and Continuity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1970), p. 525.

The Hindu caste system is certainly a religious phenomenon that divides people into artificial groups and arbitrarily restricts economic, social, cultural and occupational possibilities. As Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru rightly complained, every movement that set out to fight caste and to reform society, was finally reabsorbed into the caste structure as a distinct *jati* or group.¹⁵ Though no serious scientific comparative study of such movements has been carried out, they suggest that it is the property of this social system that such reform movements well up periodically, develop through a certain cycle and then get absorbed into the system itself.¹⁶ The system, however, represents a basic socio-religious insight: One has one's position, talents, roles, powers and privileges not in opposition to or in conflict or competition with others. All receive what they are and what they have from the one single underlying ground of all being, and what they receive are not meant for themselves but for the service of others. In this system the priest and the king are not, at least in principle, two opposing forces competing for the allegiance of the same constituency, but complementary principles like male and female, husband and wife. One represents the divine authority, while the other takes care of its application through power. While the Western sociology endeavoured to establish equality of all as the basic principle, the East institutionalized inequality and hierarchy: The Brahmin came from the mouth of Purusa, the primeval Creator, the Kshatriya, the fighting class from his arms, the Vaisya, the class of cultivators and merchants from his thighs and the Sudra, the menial class from his feet! But what was emphasized was not hierarchy but equality: Each one was bound to serve others according to his position and talents lest one should fall away from that position and lose all one's gifts.

The benevolent social role of Hindu religion issues from the fact that it operates on two levels, the transcendental as well as the practical. The transcendental deals with its metaphysical principles of religion, wants to lead people to an intuitive experience of the One-without-a-second, aims at the needs of society as a whole, and is handled mainly, though not exclusively by Brahmin priests who occupy the highest rank in society. The transcendental deities are considered manifestations of the Absolute and are looked upon as

15. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India* (New York: John Day, 1946), p. 112.

16. D. G. Mandelbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 525.

universal in scope, their message is conveyed in Sanskritic texts, and their rites and ceremonies follow a regular pattern. The pragmatic level of religion, on the other hand, if handled by priests of a low *jati* or class, consists in the worship of deities that are considered local in power and influence with their messages and stories transmitted through Folklore or the vernacular. Religion on this level has the immediate scope of personal benefits and such local exigencies as the cure of a sick child and success in family ventures. The transcendental religion is connected to religious centres far beyond the village as well as those within, while the pragmatic religion is confined mainly to shrines within the locality.¹⁷ But there is no actual conflict either between these two religions or their respective priests. In fact, the Brahmin who looks down upon the practices of the local religion, may in times of need try to secure the help of the local godlings, say when his own child is sick or on some such urgent common instances.¹⁸

The various social levels and ranks participate differently in matters belonging to religion, economics and politics. Those who are higher in rank and closer to the gods are considered purer. They receive the left-overs from the sacrifices offered to the gods and in their turn provide spiritual gifts to the inferior ranks, while the material wealth offered by the inferior ranks to those higher up are less in value. Since the aspects of the material world that they handle are inferior in nature they are less pure than the higher castes. The higher *jatis* or castes approach all things with a more detached, selfless and universalistic attitude while the lower castes pressed more by their immediate needs approach the religious, economic and political areas in a more selfish and pragmatic manner.

5. Caste and Social Change

Brahmanical religion based on caste is often very tyrannical in its treatment of the lower castes imposing on them serious restrictions in the socio-cultural and economic fields, thus condemning people to life-long subserviance to the higher castes. Even when possibilities for social mobility to the upper ranks are available to lower castes, accustomed through long practice to a freer way of life with regard to non-vegetarian food and liquor and the greater social freedom of

17. *Ibid.*, p. 411.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 412.

women they are unable to conform to the stricter traditions of the higher castes in such areas. When a low caste Hindu is converted to Christianity or Islam his original social and economic handicaps follow him into the new religion. On the whole, caste system is a very rigid religio-social set-up.

But the same religious system provides also some escape hatches from such social disadvantages. Religious cults were and still remain one of the principal voluntary associations available to villagers of all castes. So they are often used as means for expressing discontent with an established order or for seeking political and economic change. The basic principle involved is that religion does not consist primarily in accepting certain dogmas or conforming to some ready-made rules, but is very much a matter of personal realization and hence one involving a personal search. The key to success in this enterprise lies in finding a particular holy person as a *guru*, in whom one can discover the real truth and to whom a man or woman can give unalloyed allegiance in order to receive inner strength from him. According to Louis Dumont, a majority of Indian heads of families of all castes—even Muslims—have chosen a guru, who has initiated them by whispering a *mantra* in their ears. The relationship with the guru may be brief or life long; but the search for the guru continues. The holy man is beyond caste distinctions, beyond even differences of religion. Sai Baba, a Muslim saint, whose tomb is in Maharashtra, is venerated by a great many Hindus in South India. According to Srinivas Sai Baba prayer groups exist in several South Indian cities.¹⁹

Sannyasa or religious renunciation is another means of escape from the caste structure. One who protesting against the injustices of caste structure takes up the life of renunciation and becomes a *sannyasi*, by that very fact commands the respect and admiration of all castes. A *sannyasi* cuts off his secular attachments and loses his kinship, *jati* and village. Submission to this new religious discipline can enhance his sense of power and relieve him of the feelings of helplessness.²⁰ As Louis Dumont points out: "The *Vīraśaivas* or Lingayats by their identification with the leadership of their *jangama* priests, who are gurus and renouncers, were able to get rid of the impurity

19. *Ibid.*, p. 413.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 529.

barriers of caste and replace the pure-impure complementarity of other castes with the complementarity between caste and renunciation".²¹ Perhaps, both Buddhism and Jainism which started out as religions of renouncers were able to transcend the class distinctions of Brahmanical caste precisely by their emphasis on world-renunciation.

This escaping of caste regulations through renunciation is not a denial of caste but an actual realization of its ultimate goal. For, though each caste is bound down to a particular sphere of the material world, certain rites and duties, the relationship among the castes, is not object-oriented but interpersonal. Relation to an object is only the symbol of a relation to a person.²² This interpersonal relationship is best achieved when one renounces the material world and its advantages and becomes a model for all—one who lives for the sake of others. The relationship in the caste system is not governed by any mercenary, but by the rules of the interdependence of persons in society: "The system does not consist only in the unequal distribution of the means of production, but also and more particularly, in other aspects: it institutes an interdependence between those who dispose of these means and those who do not, an interdependence which is in the end to the advantage of the latter. The rich depend on the poor to a certain extent, thanks to the 'ritual' aspect."²³ In a commercial situation all buyers and sellers are equal, each one looking for his own profit; the needs are adjusted unconsciously by the principles of commerce. But in the system of caste "not only are the majority of the relationships personal, but this is so in virtue of an organization which is to some extent deliberate and oriented toward the satisfaction of the needs of all those who enter into the system of relationships. What is effectively measured here is, so to speak, interdependence."²⁴

6. Complementarity of East and West

There is no doubt that interpersonal relationship and interdependence of the rich and the poor, the pure and the impure, the renouncers and the caste people, emphasized by the caste system over the principles of economy as the determining principle of human

21. Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 189-91.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 375, n. 42n.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 103

24. *Ibid.*, p. 105

society present a high ideal for humanity to have in view and to follow. But at the same time one has also to recognize the impracticality of this ideal on a large scale especially in the context of modern society. The hierarchical order and the interdependence of persons are the ideals for a closely knit village community. Sir Charles Metcalfe, one of the founding administrators of the British rule in India spoke in glowing terms about the village: "The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything that they want within themselves and almost independent of any foreign relations. Wars pass over it; regimes come and go; but the village as a society always emerges unchanged, unshaken, self-sufficient!"²⁵ Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave and others spoke wistfully about the re-establishment of "gramraj", the village ideal as the solution for all the problems of India. But this self-sufficient, self-contained village was only an ideal. The whole traditional society with marriages between people of different villages, constant visiting of relatives, and frequent religious pilgrimages consistently militated against the independence of the village. The evolution of inter-regional markets, the emergence of towns and cities as nerve centres of public life and the services of state and central governments including major hospital facilities, police and judiciary, made available through the urban centres have virtually destroyed the interpersonal intimacy, concern, caring and sharing that characterized village life. Left behind are the inequalities in rights and privileges perpetuated by custom and ritual and the exploitation of the weak by the rich and the powerful. Hence caste as actually practised today is an unmixed evil.

Besides, hierarchical interdependence and interpersonal relationships in a religious atmosphere were socially viable when material resources for the support of all concerned could be taken for granted, and the main concern was to help each one attain self-fulfilment and final liberation. But today resources have run out and there is not enough to satisfy the needs of all. Hence the main question is not what one is and what one's place in the social hierarchy is, but rather how each one can best satisfy his or her immediate needs. Lest this should lead to a selfish scramble to grab for oneself what is available, the focus of social concern should be shifted to what each one can do to produce more.

25. D. G. Mandelbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 377.

However, the Western ideal of free enterprise and the open market economy is not a viable alternative. Its basic motto is: "You get only what you pay for; there is no free lunch for any one anywhere!" The idea behind it is that the need for and availability of things will regulate the prices of goods and that profit is a sufficient motive to produce an adequate supply of necessary goods. Both Capitalism and Marxism are the direct fruits of this materialistic concern. Profit is the only ruling principle of Capitalism. The system takes care of the workers, the disadvantaged and the poor only to the extent they affect the flow of material profits. To say the least, here man becomes the tool and the material goods become the goal. Human dignity, man's spiritual values, and the interpersonal relationships in the human society are completely ignored or at best instrumentalized to produce more material profits. Marxism, on the other hand, emphasizes the value of human labour, the dignity of the common man, and the importance of the human collectivity. But its materialistic outlook places the premium on hatred rather than on love and fellowship, and advocates class war for the achievement of its goals. Since the oppressor of today will become the oppressed of tomorrow, it only shifts the social problem from one class to another and does not solve it. Man's problems cannot be solved by focussing one's attention exclusively on his material needs.

Perhaps the solution will be to combine the religious social ideal of the East with the efficient organization of the West. The divine hierarchy of Hinduism which is oriented upwards has to spell out its implications for the material world. If the interpersonal relationship is the highest ideal of man it cannot be kept as an abstract ideal but has to be carried out in the actual human world of today. The task of the sacral human society is to make this world conform to the spiritual ideal, to make this world hospitable to all, to produce enough through the co-operation of all concerned to satisfy the needs of all. But the East has placed the priority on contemplation and self-realization and not on action. Here the genius of the West that places the emphasis on action is of vital importance. The goal of religion is not God; God or gods do not need the service of human beings. The goal of religion is man himself. It gives man the mission to achieve a proper understanding of his own human reality, its social and interpersonal character and to express it in real life. When even a single human being is oppressed, exploited or is starving it is the humanity

of all that is called into question. Hence the social goal of rebuilding humanity is a religious goal: "Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!" *Vice versa*, the religious goal of salvation is a social goal: It is the task of rebuilding humanity as the family of God, the sacral society in which each person has his unique role to play and to contribute to the happiness of all.