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Religion as Integration of Life

It is our firm belief that the Absolute unveils Himself in India, in the religious expressions of Indians, in and through the thought categories and life-patterns that convey the culture of India. Whatever be the religion we profess in India, it has to be through and through Indian in its expression. Religious consciousness is basically a co-consciousness. Every experience of ours is encapsuled in a particular expression which has its beauty and bounds. But an authentic experience of the Divine must help us break the shell of narrow communalism and selfish sectarianism. It is this profound conviction that made us concentrate more on the comparative study of religions and work for the integration and harmony of religions.

It is with this sincere desire to leave and express religion in its authenticity, to make it a powerful vehicle of our unity and brotherhood and contribute towards the growth of a mature religious co-consciousness that we have made some modest attempts at Bangalore, Rome and New Jersey. In making these limited and humble attempts for bringing people of various religious affiliations together we always received the encouragement and co-operation of many. Several universities at home and abroad are collaborating with us. The *Journal of Dharma*, an International quarterly review of Religions, is an excellent expression of this wonderful co-operation. Many Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Muslim and Christian societies and a good many of their scholars are generously co-operating with us. It is by working together for achieving a goal that we grow together and realize together the ideal of experiencing our common religiosity as well as our identity of purpose.

Religion and science must meet, and they do meet in human experience. But we must be able to unfold the hidden layers of our experience scientifically. Some of us think that we live in an age of demythologization. But we forget that every conscious process of demythologization slowly takes us to a new form of mythologization;

so varied and complex are human experience. In the very variety and complexity of human experience, there lies deep down within us an unconscious craving for greater consciousness and better harmony and complementarity. We will strive to make more conscious about this dimension of man that integrates the apparently contrary aspects separating the one from the other. It is in this context we see the relevance of theme for this international seminar.

A Call and A Task

The topic of our seminar suggests a call and a task. It is a call or an invitation extended to the living religions of the world; especially to the religions in our own country, which is well-known for its religious fervour and diversities. This call is a task of re-building and re-integrating the harmony and solidarity of a nation which are often threatened by several communal forces. The most paradoxical and deplorable thing is, on account of misunderstood or misplaced values the name of religion is often brought into the arena of warfare. It looks as if religions, which are supposed to bring men together and build up solidarity, are now in the battle-field, fighting for "gods" who apparently need human defence. People very often make simplistic statements such as: "Catholics and Protestants are fighting in Ireland"; "Hindus and Muslims are fighting in India"; "The people of Yahweh and Allah are fighting in the Middle East". Though these statements may seem right to ordinary men, the truth is not so simple as it is made out to be. The real fight in Ireland is between men of Irish and English (Scottish) origin. The Scottish immigrants happened to be Protestants. So also the real fight in India is often between men of different ethnic groups as a result of socio-political exploitation and oppression. The fight is ultimately of social, ethnical or political origin, often vulgarized wrongly as fight between religions. Yet one thing is true. The fight points to the failure of the working power of a living religion to settle disputes and enable people to live together amicably. Can religion awaken true consciousness in man in such a way that mankind can find solutions for their problems in a more reasonable way, mutually accepting and respecting each other and acknowledging everybody's sacred right to exist and develop. It is in inculcating an authentic consciousness in man that the religions have to play a role. To play this role meaningfully, they may have to look back to their own history, critically evaluate their own cherished positions and their relevance to the

contemporary world and, if need be, courageously and generously modify their positions and take a new stand. It is in this context and for facing such challenges that we thought of providing a forum for discussion on the role of religion in the national integration. Though the scope of the topic of discussion would be enlarged to bring in world dimensions, we have our own country before us with a variety of religious persuasion as the immediate field of praxis of the ideal we visualize or wish to talk about.

What is Religion?

Religion may be defined in its narrowest sense as "cult of God or gods". In a wider sense religion may mean "man's quest for Transcendence". This may include the primitive religions where the idea of a god was not yet present or the highly developed religions like Buddhism, where the idea of God was not found necessary. In either case it points to something that is most important for man. By the word religion we understand "that which is man's ultimate concern". It is the quest for the ultimate meaning of his existence.

But this absolute and unconditional is never expressed in its pure absoluteness. Man is always engaged in the struggle to express the Absolute in terms of the particular, and the Unconditional in conditional terms. The Ultimate and the Absolute which man seeks is articulated in finite and man-made symbols related to this world of his existence. Though religious symbols refer to the ultimate meaning, these meanings cannot be experienced except in "definite, particular – socially and historically conditioned – forms of experience, and through definite, historical, symbolic media peculiar to that community. Religion thus unites man with the heaven and the earth, eternity and time, and with the infinity of his potential openness and the limitations of his particularity. This characteristic quality peculiar to religions, namely, its power to combine time and transcendence, the Absolute and the particular, is at the same time its strength and weakness and the root cause for its success or failure. The end aim of religion is integration. Both prophetic and mystical religions strive for this integration in their own way. The whole of the *Bhagavat Gita* and the Gospel can, to my mind, be summarized in one term: INTEGRATION; integration of energies with ourselves and integration of ourselves with the world we live in our daily life. It is said that the whole Jungian Psychology can be expressed in one

term: integration. To investigate and interpret religion as integration is a basic lesson I learned from my Oxford Professor, late Prof. R. C. Zaehner, who, while recognizing the diversity and differences of religious experience, insisted on the necessity of harmonizing the different levels of religious experiences, such as the mythical, mystical, ethical and theological. If these aspects of religion are not seen together and taken together it is always in danger of falling into the traps of indifferentism or fanaticism. A healthy and creative role of religion means a balanced attitude towards the different dimensions of religion, always acknowledging the dimensions of matter, namely, that of history, tradition and particularities; but at the same time allowing the spirit to transcend matter. This takes us to the next section.

Contemporary Attitudes towards Religion

We observe different kinds of attitude towards religion in the contemporary world. They may be enumerated as :

1. *Religious indifferentism*
2. *Religious fanaticism*
3. *Religious co-existence* and 4. *Religious co-consciousness.*

Today, man lives in an age of secularism. The enormous success of technology, its power to transform the universe is at the bottom of this movement. This phenomenon has brought about a shift of accent in the value-system of modern man. Instead of stressing a supernatural world "up there", he wants to emphasize and explore the world that is here and now. He is a man bound by history, time and progress. His values are very much involved with this world. Many of them exhibit an indifferent attitude toward religion. But this attitude, which we see as a sign of our time, may not last long. Time and again the quest for the ultimate meaning surges up in the mind of man, even in the mind of modern man. Along with the attitude of religious indifference we also see tendencies towards religious quest expressed in different ways all over the world. The modern religious movements (TM, Divine Light Movement, Jesus Movement, etc.) are some of the typical examples.

In another section of society, more often in developing countries, we find a sort of religious fanaticism usurping the place of authentic religious expressions. The fanatics may make uncompromising demands in the name of religion, such as a separate state based on

religion, or job reservations in the name of religion. This may naturally create communal disharmony, and consequently religion is something in the name of which people are hated or branded as degraded. This sad state of things emerges from a profound misunderstanding of religion and unjust dragging of religion into petty and selfish socio-political issues. In such a context, religion is often skilfully misused to flare up emotions of the people, especially of the uneducated, making a neutral issue a religious one. By this tremendous harm is done to religion, to its own followers, because they are cleverly led into a profound misunderstanding of their own religion.

Religious indifferentism and fanaticism can do a lot of harm to a nation, the first by depriving religion of its role in a modern society and the second by exaggerating the role of religion and fighting for the unimportant elements of religions treating them as ultimate and decisive. Both ways of behaviour may jeopardize national integration as the first makes the nation thoroughly materialistic and devoid of any spiritual roots which can keep society together, while the second makes people fed up with religions that they ultimately decide not to have any religion.

The Authentic Religion and its Role in National Integration

In such a world, and especially in such a country of misplaced religious values, the authentic religions should come forward willing to co-exist, and to awaken genuine values in the consciousness of their followers. Religions, true to themselves, always stand for truth, love, harmony and peace. These are values which humanity likes, seeks and endeavours to establish. That religions may really be able to do this, they must be real embodiments of time and transcendence. It is the element of transcendence embodied in religion that elevates religion above all historical and communitarian limitations and gives its followers the essential freedom to rise above the bondages of its own limitations and link themselves with the men of other faiths. If this element of transcendence is lost sight of, then religion becomes a matter of narrow historicity, an ethnically or locally bound reality, the dead weight of which its own followers are unable to escape or overcome. Naturally, in their state of unfreedom and *avidya*, they fight. This sad state of religions is well depicted by the poet Vayalar of Malayalam literature in his award-winning film-song: "Man made religions, religions made their gods, religions and gods together

divided the earth and this world is now turned into a lunatic asylum''. The poet is deploring religion which has lost sight of the element of transcendence. The award was given to the poem precisely because it hints at the need for a higher outlook in religion so that the followers of different religions may live peacefully, co-exist and work together for the building up of a nation. A religion that has lost its transforming power is a dead religion that can only create barriers between man and man.

The genuine values that are awakened in the heart of men will, in course of time, flow into genuine actions of love and acceptance of one's own neighbour. The result will be harmony, peace and an integrated society. Gandhi once said: "The greatness of a religion consists in its capacity to produce great minds," meaning, "great minds capable of accepting and appreciating the other". Actually the teachings of religion always stand for such a goal. In the grand scene of the ultimate judgement, when people are arrayed on the merits of their actions Christ gathers on His right people from all nations who have acted with righteousness and love, love which is the substance of every moral law. Elsewhere Jesus illustrates this principle with the story of the good Samaritan, the representative of a rejected religion, who practices love, while the representatives of the accepted religions pass by. Further, in his talk with the Samaritan woman, Jesus denies the ultimate significance of any particular place of adoration and demands an adoration in Spirit and Truth. Religions should, therefore, help man to seek values that are basic and eternal, that will bind men together and thus create a world of love, abiding peace and harmony. To make this possible we have to develop certain norms which will shape our attitude towards our fellow-believers and eventually bring about national integration on a deeper and lasting basis.

Practical Norms to facilitate the Role of Religion in National Integration

In outlining these practical norms I am strongly influenced by the guidelines given by the Catholic Church's secretariat for non-Christian Religions. The Church envisages better and healthier interaction between religions of our time that all may live in peace and happiness :

1. We should try to understand the other person in greater depth, especially if he is the follower of a different faith. It

is an accepted truth in philosophy that our love always depends on our knowledge. If our knowledge is shrouded in prejudices and unpleasant remembrances of the past experiences, our love is certainly going to be lukewarm and ineffective. Naturally we will be totally incapable of working for national integration.

2. Our deepened understanding of the other person should lead us to share his life. While remaining faithful to oneself and to one's own tradition, one should try to belong psychologically to the world of one's fellow-believers as well. Only then will we be able to feel with them, and support them in their struggles for self-realization. This attitude of mutual support will in the long run provide a durable basis for national integration.
3. We should accept the other, especially the follower of other religions for what he is. It is easier to accept people according to our standard of values and ways of looking at things. Religion is basically a world-vision and a way of life which prepares a man for action. That I may understand my fellow-citizen, I have to understand his world-vision which derives him to action.
4. We must know how to learn from one another. Accepting and appreciating the other will be made easy if we think that our ways and vision, however good they may be have their own limitations and, therefore, we have to learn from others, from other men who have a different vision. Indeed the essential element in our encounter with others is to look on them as people who have something to teach us which can be very useful for our own development. Of course, that does not mean that we ourselves have nothing to offer.

If the followers of all religions look at their fellow-believers of other faiths with such an attitude, surely we are changing the atmosphere of this country which has an enormous wealth of religious heritage and varieties. A new nation will surely emerge strengthened by a deeper sense of unity and an all-embracing love to which different religions make their contribution in different ways. Religion being a call to be co-creators with God, to be the makers of His world and

builders of this nation of which everyone of us is an essential part, it is our basic duty to work for a better integrated nation.

India is a nation where a quest for truth and the cry of the poor equally assail our ears. The image of India abroad also reflects these two dimensions of reality. They are in fact inter-related. To create a new nation, integrating all stratas of its society, the quest for truth should heed the cry of the poor and our energies should be the real praxis of creating a new nation, a nation of love and acceptance, concord and peace and basic freedom and equality for everyone. Let us all become more aware of this role of religion.