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## The Christian Sensitivity in National Integration

National integration has been the theme of Seminars and Study Groups, Cultural Organisations and Government Committees for over 25 years. There is no difference of opinion on its need. All are aware of the dissensions that exist at economic, political, social and religious levels that seem to be constantly pushing the country towards disintegration. I need not here make an elaborate analysis of these well-known factors. I would, however, like to emphasize that these factors are very closely inter-related. What may seem outwardly to be a political problem has economic, social and even religious roots. But among these factors, religion seems to be the deepest and most difficult to handle, operating as it does on emotional, sometimes unconscious, levels of motivation and attitudes.

The basis of integration in a vast country like India would be a *consensus* on certain values on which social relationships and activity are based. These values are enshrined in the Constitution of India. But they are not of much use if they exist only there. They must be engraved in the heart of every Indian so that these values become a sort of religion with him. The mention of 'religion' here indicates the depth at which these values must be rooted in the consciousness and behaviour of every Indian. This cannot happen without the active co-operation of all the religions, in such a way that every religion sustains and reinforces these values. These are not identified with any one religious tradition, but are common to all religions linking however, in various ways, with each religious tradition.

What we need is a consensus on these values among the various religious groups, not merely tolerance or co-existence. Tolerance may be found adequate in relations between nations for the purpose of peaceful co-existence. It is hardly adequate within a country that has to shape the community into one nation. But this consensus must be

rooted variously in the various religions. And this consensus itself must have a religious character about it. This is why American Sociologists have mooted the idea of a *civil religion*. Values like the dignity of the human person and his rights, freedom, equality, justice etc., can be said to be religious insofar as they have an absolute character. I think that one cannot really achieve national integration without all the citizens agreeing upon such a basic set of values. The role of religion in promoting national integration is precisely its ability to make its followers subscribe to such a set of values.

It is in this context that I would like to reflect on the "Christian Sensitivity in National Integration." More concretely I would like to take three areas of values that seem to me essential to our nation-building today and see how Christianity can contribute in promoting these among its own people and also among others. When I speak of Christianity I am not speaking in the abstract about a set of dogmas and ideal structures. I am speaking of the Indian Christian Community in its historical context, in India. However, we have to keep in mind various aspects like what it would like to do and what it actually succeeds in doing.

### **The Value of Secularism**

The first value that I would like to stress is *secularism*. We need to describe this value carefully. The secular is not opposed to the sacred. In that case religion will not really have anything to do with it. What we mean by saying that India is a secular state is that it does not favour any one religion but treats all religions equally, allowing them full freedom to function. The state even supports the secular activities of religious communities like schools, developmental activities etc.

Secularism as a legal concept has often been looked at from the point of view of the state. The state treats all religions alike. But quite often we fail to explore and analyse the implications of the concept of secularism from the point of view of the people. The state can afford to be neutral with regard to religions. But a citizen's attitude to another citizen belonging to another religion cannot be one of neutrality. On the one hand he should respect the other's convictions and freedom to practise his religion. On the other he must work side by side with him to build up the national community

that needs collaboration not only at the economic and political levels but also on the level of values. These not only border on religion but involve and are supported by religious faith. This requires a complex attitude that is almost *advaitic* in its depth. It is a mystery of the many and the one demanding a positive approach to pluralism. It is the mystery of love which enables a person to feel one with a fellow citizen, while professing at the same time a very different faith conviction. It is the middle path between proselytism and tolerance. It seeks for unity not through uniformity, neither through non-interference but through respect for differences. It moves away from co-existence to pro-existence, living for the other. This is most difficult in the area of religion. If it can be done then handling pluralism at economic, social and political fields will be much more easy.

What can Christianity do to promote such pro-existence? In recent years Christianity has developed an attitude of dialogue with other religions. It is a middle path between universal claims with being tolerant on the one hand and an attitude of co-existence that sees religions as different rivers, all flowing into the same sea. Dialogue supposes that these rivers keep constantly criss-crossing and may at some places run, not only parallel, but together in the same direction. Hence there can be a lot of sharing, of giving as well as receiving, of mutual influence. There can be limited agreements that lead to common approaches to problems, joint action and shared prayer. While I do not claim that this attitude of dialogue is something exclusive to Christianity, I think it would be true to assert that it is being actively promoted by Christianity in India today through sessions of dialogues, living together, common study etc.

Such collaboration and dialogue can be the solid base for a real and active consensus on values, leading to common commitment and action. It has sometimes been suggested that Christianity can serve as a buffer or as an intermediary between Hinduism and Islam. This may be a useful concept at the social and political levels. It would be much more useful if Christianity can play a catalysing role which brings together in dialogue people belonging to various religions and leads to a consensus in values. In Catholic schools and colleges, for instance, while the Catholics were taught about their religious beliefs, the others were provided classes for moral instruction – a course on values and attitudes based on reason alone. But then one often hears

the plea about his own beliefs, that Hindus for instance, must be helped to become better hindus. Later it used to be said that each student must be given a chance to learn about all religions. What is needed today is to take seriously the religious roots of values and develop a sense of community and participation around them without detriment to a pluralism of faith-convictions.

The prayer-meetings of Gandhi were a step in this direction. Though this is occasionally repeated it has become a symbolic gesture at its best or an empty formal ritual at its worst. One can explore the possibility of holding joint celebrations of national festivals, at the religious level also—at least at impart a religious tone to national days. Here is an area that deserves exploration and experimentation.

Such an open approach presupposes that religion itself is not seen as a monolith that has to be taken or abandoned as a whole. A tendency to theocracy, whether Hindu, Buddhist, Christian or Islamic, has always been there at various times in various places. But one cannot think of a multi-religious community without recognizing the distinction – not dichotomy – between the sacred and the secular and accepting a certain autonomy for the secular. In this area also Christianity has had a lot of painful experience acquired in the West over the last five or six centuries. This experience may be useful to younger nations in delineating the delicate relationship between a religious and a secular state not merely in theory in the form of constitutinso but in the actual practice of day-to-day living. Religious pluralism is a fact in most countries though one religion may be dominant in most of them.

A true secularism would necessarily involve a certain amount of secularization. Religious meaning, being the ultimate, always tends to be all-ennobling. Hence the path towards autonomy for the secular passes through the secularization of institutions previously linked closely to religion. The problem faced by us in India to-day is that our country has adopted the concept of secular institutions. But the vast majority of the people and of the leaders have not gone through the process of secularization. Hence the spirit of secularism has remained an ideal, occasionally protected by legal battles more often professed than practised.

The spirit of secularism and the autonomy of the secularism depends on a positive view of the world and of history. While such

a positive view is not absent in the Indian traditions, at the level of higher religious attitudes many Indians would regard the world as *Māyā*, irrespective of their practical involvement in it. India certainly projects before the world an other-worldly image with its *gurus* and *sanyāsis*. The common people too seem to be passive and resigned for the same reasons. In this context religion becomes a private, personal pursuit of self-realization. The secular world is not seen as related in any way to this spiritual pursuit. It is well left alone, when it is not considered a necessary evil. This certainly is not the kind of autonomy for the secular which we are looking for. Or rather this is not the kind of detachment from the secular that we expect religion to have. While religion should not be too closely identified with the secular, it must be relevant and involved. The balance between relevance and autonomy, especially in a multi-religious situation, is a very delicate one. The Second Vatican Council in two of its Decrees on "The Church in the Modern World" and "Religious Freedom" has tried to work out this delicate balance. These documents can serve as a useful point of departure for a further discussion of the problem.

### **Individual Rights and Personal Freedom**

A second value that seems to me to be very important for the promotion of national integration is the respect for individual rights and personal freedom. One of the principal obstacles today which hampers national integration is group loyalties based on caste, community, language or religion. A group identity as a mediation between self and national identity is certainly a very necessary thing. Pluralism in other areas also, besides religion, is a fact that we have to take into account. But a group identity should not stifle personal freedom and identity; nor should it reduce a national sense to a balancing of factional forces. On the contrary, group identities that would help national integration should be based on free personal association which is task or service oriented, and not on factors external to the person such as caste or community.

The Indian scene today is very much caste-bound and this has really made a mockery of national integration and democratic processes. In a caste-based society the individual is not really important. Everything is hierarchized and duties are clearly defined. What is enduring is the role or function. Where caste is combined with a feudal

order, the individual is actually at the disposal—or rather mercy—of the community and the community means, in such a situation, the feudal lord or the dominant caste. Economic power often strengthens and supports such social power. At the mythico-religious level this social order is given religious sanction by the doctrine of *Karma*. Man is at the mercy of the forces of cosmic order, subject to an impersonal fate. All that he can do is to escape it, not to change it. Constant efforts to liberate man from *Karma* have often shown the path of liberation to be an escape from the *Karma*-controlled world into the inner sanctuary of the self. The person becomes a monad, isolating and marginalizing himself. One cannot build up a consensus or a secular democracy on such a heightened, but communally devalued personality. Such a self-realized personality is not worried about the secular world, while the others are more busy securing caste-based privileges rather than rights based on personal human dignity.

The revolutionary concept of a class struggle as opposed to a feudal order does not safeguard the person and democratic values either. In the struggle between the classes, class solidarity and identity become all-important. Individuals are dispensable. The class is the bearer of the new age and of salvation. Whatever may be the imagined position in the Utopian new order one hopes for, during the struggle one is just a cog in the wheel of the party machine.

In contrast to both these caste and class dominated groups, the basis of a secular democracy can only be respect for human dignity, his freedom and his rights. Any valid consensus should have to be the consensus of free beings. Any dialogue is a sharing between responsible individuals. There is no meaning in autonomy without freedom and responsibility.

A single glance at what is happening around the country is enough to convince anyone that there is scant respect for persons at every level. Human rights are ignored. People are exploited by class and caste groups, certain parties and politicians, feudalistic landlords and industrialists, a merciless and slow moving bureaucracy, and an intricate, unhelpful and easily manipulated legal system and a largely unenterprising press. The individual's rights are everywhere trampled upon with impunity. The poor and the suffering have no dignity left. Group pressure seems the only means of protection available. A man is not important by himself as a human being. His worth is measured

in terms of which group he belongs to, who he knows, how much money he has etc. So the very foundation of a democratic order on which a community can be built up seems to be absent. The only right the individual is still left with is the vote and that too can be manipulated in a thousand ways. Hence, strange as it may sound, the first task today for anyone committed to national integrity is to liberate the individual—not in the sense that an individual can withdraw into himself and search for and secure inner freedom and thus rise above the everyday world but in the sense that as a responsible person he may be free to contribute his mite to nation-building and be involved in the democratic processes of a secular state. National integration cannot be the result of an equilibrium of power or influence among rival groups. Special favours and privileges granted to the scheduled castes and tribes may be a necessary remedial measure. But it can only be an interim one till they are ready to do their bit in nation-building. Equality is as important a value in a democratic society as freedom.

It is in this context that the option of the Christians in the Constituent Assembly which framed the Indian Constitution becomes significant and prophetic. When the option of special reservation of seats and electorates for minority religious groups was discussed, the Christians chose to forego the protection and privileges afforded by such reservations and to put their trust on the sanctity of the Fundamental Rights guaranteed to every citizen by the Constitution. This may have been a symbolic gesture. Still it was a significant affirmation of the principle of secularism which asks that political rights and freedom be guaranteed to every man on the basis of his dignity as a human person and not on such considerations as his affiliation to a particular group whether religious, economic or social. It is a pity that this trust in the constitutional guarantee on Fundamental Rights and freedom is being slowly eroded today. The poor and the unorganized have no rights. The individual has lost his dignity. Political patronage and power, even raw violence, seem more effective in every sphere. In this context Christianity can again play a significant role in the promotion of the sense of the dignity of the human person on which the respect for Fundamental Rights depends.

One concrete way in which Christianity shows its respect for the individual person is its care for the sick, the suffering, the old and the

dying. In a class or caste-based society the individual is dispensable and a sick person may even be seen as a liability. But in Christian hospitals, old people's homes, orphanages etc., everywhere the dignity and worth of the individual person is being affirmed even today in practice.

### **Social Justice**

A third value that I think indispensable for the promotion of national integration—the first two being secularism and respect for personal freedom and rights—is justice. Though it is implicit in the first two, I think it is good to explicate it. Can we dream of an integrated and united country when more than 60% of the people are below the poverty line and they are kept there by unjust and oppressive socio-economic structures? What do secularism and individual rights and freedoms mean to some one who has nothing to eat? Any effort at national integration is doomed to failure if it does not face squarely the problem of growing injustice. It is not my purpose here to offer here a detailed analysis of the problems and propose solutions. I shall just limit myself to a few observations.

A climate of justice will be brought about only through a revolution, even if it is only peaceful and non-violent. Only a revolution can bring about structural changes in the socio-economic-political order. Secondly revolution will not be a gift from somebody. It can only be the result of a people's movement—people becoming aware of their rights, asking for them and organizing themselves to demand those rights. Finally, in India only an integral approach to revolution, which takes into account cultural and religious besides socio-economic and political factors, has a chance of success.

Even if there is a large measure of acceptance of these, I think that Christianity can make a real contribution to such a revolution. This contribution can be discussed at two levels: what Christianity has been trying to do and what Christianity can do. The Gospel of Jesus has certainly inspired many revolutionaries in recent times, including Mahatma Gandhi. The message of Jesus is presented as a revolutionary liberating message by many Christian theologians today in India and elsewhere. These theologians also attempt an integral approach to revolution by not neglecting the role of religion and values in the revolutionary process. Many Christian groups in various



parts of the country have started helping people to become aware of their rights and responsibilities in nation-building through various methods of non-formal education. Christianity has got a twofold net-work which it can place at the service of the promotion of justice and nation-building. One consists of its educational and other institutions. Various and growing efforts are being made them Agents of social change. The other net-work is the body of voluntary workers who are involved in rendering various services to the people. No movement can succeed without the support and labour of dedicated workers. Christianity has them. But much more could be done to focus and co-ordinate their efforts towards community building.

I also wish to draw our attention to the fact that in the recent past there have been periods when India's security has been threatened from outside. There may be a tendency, therefore, to consider unity in purely defensive terms. If national integration is a positive value, it should open out to the world. All world religions demonstrate this possibility of opening out to the world without losing one's identity. Christianity too can play a role in keeping this international perspective alive, even while bringing the nation together. A final clarification, in conclusion, would be that whenever I have said that Christianity would do this or that I have not done so in any exclusive sense, but in a positive way. To seek the collaboration, therefore, of all religions at all levels will be an indispensable step in any movement towards national integration.