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THE POLARITY OF LAW AND FREEDOM IN PAULINE RELIGION

Looking for a sensible and correct assessment of the relevance and future of religions, I came across the two following quotations, and, I think, they spell out the dynamics of our discussions about religions:

The future of religion is connected with the possibility of developing a faith in the possibilities of human experience and human relationships that will create a vital sense of the solidarity of human interests and inspire action to make that sense a reality. (John Dewey).

No creed is final. Such a creed as mine must grow and change as knowledge grows and changes. (Sir Arthur Keith).

The implied idea in these quotations is that religions have to undergo a process of change and re-making if they have to exercise any influence on humanity.

I

Can religions undergo a process of re-making? Is it conceivable that religion, the bond that binds God and man, changes at all? If we accept the theory that God is the author of religion, we cannot think of a change because God does not and cannot change: it is our duty to change ourselves to fit into the structure of a religion, rather than we re-make it to suit our plans and purposes.

But the undeniable fact is that we live at a time when religions do change and show signs of a re-making process. We find ourselves forced to reconsider current and inherited beliefs and ideas, to bring about some harmony between present and past experience and to reach a position which will satisfy the demands of feeling and reflection and provide confidence to face the future. If religion, as a subject of critical inquiry, yielding results of both practical and theoretical significance, has attracted increasing attention today, this can be ascribed to many factors. Among them are a rapid progress of scientific knowledge and thought, a deeper intellectual interest in the subject and widespread tendencies in all parts of the world to reform or reconstruct religion. We also see in it the effect of social, political and international events of a sort which, in the past, have both influenced and been influenced by religion. Whenever the ethical or moral value or activities or conditions is questioned, the value of religion is involved. All deep-stirring experiences invariably compel a reconsideration of the most fundamental ideas, whether they are explicitly religious or not. There also raise problems of justice, human destiny, God, and the universe, and these in turn involve problems of the relation between the 'religious' and the 'secular'.

In fact, it is in the very nature of religion that it should undergo a re-making process. The very 'being' of religion is subordinated to its 'becoming' process in the same way as the very 'being' of humanity and human nature as such is subject to its process of 'becoming'. It is precisely within the context of its 'becoming' and 're-making' that religion continues to have relevance for humanity. There is no denying the fact that religion has an unchangeable nature within itself, nor the fact that behind every religion there is a divine element transcending human manipulation. But this is no reason for advocating the fixity of a religion and its immutability.

The re-making process to which all religions are subject today basically reveals itself in two different forms : (a) in inter-religious relationships, (b) within the structure of each religion.

(a) *In Inter-religious relationships*

The re-making process in religious traditions is all too evident in inter-religious relationships, especially if we take into account the dynamics of the psychological approach that characterized inter-religious relationships in the past. Leaving the remote past out of consideration, if we look into our immediate past, we can discern four

different stages through which religious relationships have passed. We are all aware of a stage of mutual *hatred* among religions, one religion despising the other and trying to establish its own superiority over the other. From that stage of hatred we have gradually emerged into a stage of mutual *tolerance*, one religion allowing the other to exist and operate. There was not yet the question of mutual recognition, but of not interfering with the existence of other religions. We came to a third stage when religions engaged themselves in a state of mutual *dialogue*, one religion listening to the other, one religion trying to learn about the other, thus obviating prejudices and preconceived ideas and paving the way to mutual recognition and respect. This stage is still in operation along with that of tolerance. But an even bolder step was taken when religious thinkers recognized the imperfect and limited state of their own religions and established a principle of *complementarity*, by which each religion had to be perfected and purified not only by learning from other religions but also by accepting thoughts and ideas which have a bearing on one's own religion. It is not here a question of one religion becoming another religion, nor is it a question of religious indifferentism. Without prejudice to one's own religious authenticity, the follower of each religion must be prepared to perfect his own religious commitment through a basic openness to learn and become more perfect through his contact with another religion. We are, in fact, moving towards the threshold of this golden era of religious thought.

Basic to this understanding of religion is the acceptance of religious pluralism, which is another significant phenomenon in inter-religious relationships. It is not an acceptance of pluralism *de facto* but of *de jure*. The various religious traditions have a right to exist and establish their ideals and ideologies without suppressing and supplanting other religions. There is no more question of one and only one true religion and that one religion trying to establish itself as a religion for the whole of humanity. Each religion has to accept and approve of the fundamental right other religions have to propagate their philosophy and theology as a contribution to the growth of humanity.

(b) *Within the structure of each religion*

The process of re-making is visible also within the very structure of each religion. Religion is no more a monolithic, static and immutable reality with eternally fixed principles and ideologies. There is within each religion a principle of growth and change similar to the one we find in a human person. First of all, it reveals itself in the

fact that the principle of basic freedom is accepted as characteristic of the inner nature of each religion. Though religions are controlled by their scriptures, which of themselves demand stability and fixedness, the present-day trend is that we have to redeem the spirit from the letter to make religion a dynamic reality. The most precious gift of God to human beings is their freedom, and no religion should ever create a situation within its own structure by which this basic freedom is denied or curtailed.

Another important development in religious thinking is the acceptance of the principle that religion is something which is concerned not only with the spiritual nature of man but also with the whole man in his material and spiritual dimensions. In fact, religions tend to abolish an inherited way of thinking based on a basic dichotomy in the human person. Man is one whole being with aspects that are spiritual and material. The acceptance of this fact has greatly revolutionized the inner nature of religions and their role in human history. It, beyond doubt, is one of the striking phenomena through which religions have influenced society at its social, cultural, economic and even political levels.

As a result of this integral approach to the meaning of religion we also notice the emergence of a conviction that religions are concerned with both this world and the world that transcends this one. Any religion that advocates only the reality and importance of a life beyond this world is irrelevant. Religions have a role to play in the making of human history and in the shaping of human destiny. It is perhaps at this stage that the re-making process in religious traditions has become very much perceptible and challenging. We are aware of such ideologies as a theology of liberation and revolution, a theology of the world and secularisation, and it is interesting to note that both of them claim their *raison-d'être* from the very reality of Christianity which has for centuries advocated the contempt and negligence of the world and the present world order.

This process of re-making and becoming, which we perceive and approve of as characteristic of the very essence of religion, leads us to a further reflection about the very goal and purpose of this process. We have to go beyond the principle of complementarity, to which I have already referred. I would call this process a process of *transformation*, a process through which religions transcend themselves and reach a point of convergence at which religions become *the religion*. It is not here a question of all religions transcending themselves

to become a universal religion, the differences between religions disappearing as a result and religion becoming a more palatable reality to all human beings. It is rather a question of all religions, keeping their own identity, trying to become more authentic and open and striving to reach beyond their own limited horizons of thinking in relation to God, man and the world.

We should understand this process as a conscious and conscientious one in which all religions have to engage themselves in all humility and courage, with dedication and determination. It is no betrayal of one's own religious commitment, nor is it an acceptance of religious indifferentism. If God is the ultimate goal and end of all religions, he can be reached only through this process of transcendence and all religions have to undergo a painful process of transformation to effect this transcendence.

An analogy can be drawn from the theological discussion about the nature of the Church, as it took place in Christian theology. There was a time when theologians of a particular church, especially the Roman Catholic Church, identified the Church with the Roman Catholic Church, trying to prove that only that Church has all the qualities that go with the reality of the Church as willed by Christ. This thought does not have any more relevance today as theologians try to see the reality of the Church as something transcending the denominational aspects. The Church is neither the sum total of all Churches, nor is it identified with any particular Church. The Church as willed and constituted by Christ is something that transcends all Churches. Consequently, all Churches have to undergo a process of purification and transformation by which they can become *the Church*, thus transcending the historical and human limitations which developed and became part and parcel of the denominational Churches. This goal is not reached through a federation of the various Churches nor is it achieved through any amount of ecumenical rapprochement. At the same time each Church has to learn from the other Church and enrich its own nature through a close and intimate sharing. It is this kind of mutual belongingness on the one hand and the effort to widen one's own limited horizon on the other that guarantees the relevance of all Churches as well as all religious traditions.

Once again I wish to make my point clear : Here there is no question of one religion becoming another religion, one Church becoming another Church. The Church is more than Churches; the religion is much more than religions. Perhaps Paul a follower of two living religions—Judaism and Christianity—provides us some insight and

orientation along this line of thought, precisely because he tried to see Christianity not as a new religion substituting his own religion, which was Judaism, but as a transformed expression of the very religion of which he was a firm believer and a staunch follower. What Paul did was to harmonize the polarity of law and freedom, letter and spirit, and to make religion something basically human and at the same time transcending the limitations of an established religion.

II

Perhaps the most appropriate passage I could quote here for the analysis of this thought is the one given by Luke in his description of Paul defending his own religious conviction before Felix, the Roman Governor (Acts 24 : 14-16). Allowing for the probability of the redactional reconstruction of this passage by Luke, it is important to note that the line of thinking reflected here is basically that of Paul. Here Paul is presented as defending himself and his religion before the Roman Governor, Felix. In vv. 11-13 he denies the charge of inciting the crowd to riot. He then explains how being a 'nazarene' in no way prevents him from being a faithful Jew because he understood the new life as a follower of Christ which he had embraced as the realization of his earlier life as a Jew. For his opponents, Christianity was nothing more than a sect (*hairesis*) within Judaism, just like the sect of Sadducees (Acts 5 : 17), but a sect that was spoken against everywhere (Acts 28 : 22).

In his apology, Paul tries to make the point clear to the Roman Governor that Christianity is not another religion or a group within Judaism; it is Judaism with its ancient belief and hope fulfilled and purified. Then he goes on to explain the substance and inner content of his new religious commitment in the form of a homologia (v. 14). The main elements of his faith are the following :

- (a) I worship the God of my Fathers.
- (b) I believe all things in the Law and Prophets (Old Testament).
- (c) I hope in God who raises the dead to life.
- (d) I keep a clear conscience at all times before God and men.

What Paul tried to drive home to his audience is his basic conviction that his being a Christian in no way hinders his commitment to

the basic belief of Judaism. He recognizes the fact that the 'way' he follows is the way the Old Testament and Judaism had consistently maintained, the only difference between Paul and other Jews being that he followed the way to the end while his Jewish compatriots stopped half way. In other words, Paul tried to understand Christianity as a way of life which on the one hand grows out of Judaism but on the other transcends Judaism itself. It is therefore not correct to speak of a conversion of Paul, as if Paul was converted from Judaism to Christianity. Paul was never converted from one religion to another religion. Rather he transcended the historical and human limitations of his own religion and arrived at a concept of religion based on eternal and valid principles of religious commitment in which the historical person of Jesus Christ played an important role. Paul identified Jesus Christ as the one who redeemed the Spirit of Judaism from its letter and made this Spirit the operative and dynamic principle of a way of life available to anybody and everybody.

This is precisely what Jesus meant when he said: "I did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I have not come to do away with them; but to make their teaching come true" (Mt 5 : 17). Understood in this way, it is in order if we say that Jesus did not found a new religion. In fact, the early christians never considered themselves followers of a new religion they were more concerned about their commitment to a new way of life. The name "Christians" given to the believers in Christ at Antioch (Acts 11 : 26) was more a nickname than a title of honour (cf. Acts 26 : 28). The reality of the new life they practised was oftener called *the Way* (*hē hodos*) (cf. Acts 9 : 2, 16 : 17; 18 : 25; 26; 19 : 9, 23; 22 : 4; 24 : 22). As such, it meant that the followers of Jesus were those who followed him in so far as he was the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14 : 6).

The tendency towards making rigid of this flexible form of religion became pronounced through the consistent effort of the Judaizers within the Christian movement who wanted to make it a sect within Judaism with its own code of creed and ethics. It was the task of Paul to fight against this tendency and to make Christianity what it was meant to be. He made the very concept of Christianity rest on the simple principle of faith in Jesus Christ; he understood it has a *tertium quid*, which is neither Judaism nor non-Jewish religions, but rather a way of life, transcending both Judaism and non-Jewish religions. Paul is perhaps the only Christian missionary of the first century who understood the total content of the religious movement which Christ has set in motion. The tendency to sectarianism was evident everywhere, more so in the

Churches of Galatia, and Paul had to involve himself in a serious battle against these religious fanatics. The Council of Jerusalem was a clear example of how Paul was all alone in standing up for this cause (Acts 15 : 3-35).

“ Freedom is what we have— Christ has set us free. Stand, then, as free people, and do not allow yourselves to become slaves again ” (Gal 5 : 1), Paul wrote to the Galatians. He challenged his hearers to compare the freedom which they enjoyed through the spirit with the slavery of the letter which constrained them and forced them to undergo a man made process of religious commitment. He knew only too well that it is a temptation to which all religions are always subject, namely, to substitute the spirit with the letter, to overpower the spirit that gives life with the letter that brings death and condemnation.

The task of every religion is to become aware of this tension and polarity, to be conscious of the threat that is within the very structure of a religion, handled as it is by human beings. The more we allow the letter to dominate within the religion, the more myopic and sectarian it becomes. Consequently it becomes narrow-minded, intolerant and aggressive. It begins to parade with the might of its organisation and the end-result is one religion struggling to establish itself against another religion. Not always does a Paul step in to defend the authenticity of a religion because it means paying a price for that one to fight for a cause. But Paul did not count the cost.

What we badly need today is a concerted effort on the part of all men of good-will to hold up the essence and vitality of religions and to liberate the Spirit of religions from its imprisoned situation. The process of growth and re-making, which is basic to the very reality of religion, becomes active and operative only to the extent of its Spirit being freed from its letter. The danger here is that the letter is very often identified with the Spirit or that the letter is confused with the Spirit. The layers of letter that form a religion make the liberation of the Spirit impractical, if not impossible.

We are all living at a time when our very religious commitment invites us to engage ourselves in this liberating process and thus to facilitate the process of re-making religions towards their ultimate goal. More than ever before we feel the urgency of such free and open discussions and it is only through such discussions that religions can take a common stand on issues that are threatening the world, such as

poverty, exploitation of the poor by the rich, population explosion and the like. In doing this we are not betraying our own religious commitment, rather we fulfil our task of liberating the spirit from the letter, and of establishing the principle of freedom as the most distinguishing characteristic of our religious commitment. Paul more than any other religious thinker has contributed his share in establishing this principle and it is a challenge and an invitation to us to be both committed to our religious traditions and at the same time to be engaged in transforming the same.