

IS THE MEETING OF RELIGIONS POSSIBLE ?

The issue raised in the title of this paper constitutes not merely an academic, but a practical problem of great urgency, particularly in the context of our national life. The recent upsurge of communal violence in several parts of the country has once more brought into focus the need of thinking out ways and means for promoting harmony among different communities and groups that make up our multi-religious society. This is not to say that our discussion should ignore the academic or theoretical aspects of the problem; however, to the extent to which religion constitutes a practical concern, theoretical reflection on the issue under reference cannot be divided from consideration of the practical consequences of discord and strife among followers of different religions.

On the one hand, the secular constitution of our country guarantees religious freedom to every citizen; it is committed, on the other hand to building up a progressive, modern democratic society on the sub-continent. This means, in effect, that the state expects propagandists and teachers of different religions to function within some limits. These limits should be defined, first, by the need of harmonious co-existence of people belonging to different denominational religions; and second, by the requirements of the progress and growth of the Indian Society.

There are two areas in which different religions or their followers clash with one another. It happens that the body of doctrines and beliefs cherished by one religion differs in some respect or other from those entertained by other religions. The differences may sometimes relate to unessentials, but historically, even such differences have tended to generate antagonism between different religious groups. Thus, to an outsider, the religions of Semitic origin such as Christianity and Islam, have a good deal in common; that circumstance, however, has not prevented the Muslims and the Christians from fighting one another. On the other hand, the atheistic creeds of Jainism and Buddhism have existed and even flourished in India side by side with polytheistic

Hinduism. Philosophically speaking Vedantic Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism have had much in common. But they have differed almost radically in their approaches to secular ideals and institutions. Religions also differ in respect of the modes of worship, rituals and ceremonials prescribed by them. In fact, mere doctrinal differences among religions do not count for much unless they lead to divergent and conflicting practices in the context of social life.

The conflict among religions is due largely to the behavioural implications of their teachings in a society inhabited by different religious groups. These implications assume greater significance when they have a bearing on the forms of socio-political norms and institutions. Thus the caste system of the Hindus has, of late, been exercising a pernicious influence on the working of Indian democratic institutions, and the Muslims' continued adherence to polygamy is inconsistent not only with the modern ethos but also with the country's programme for arresting the growth of population. Rightly or wrongly the Hindus believe that the system of caste-divisions is ordained by their sacred texts; the Muslims likewise believe that polygamy is sanctioned by their religious laws. While such minor matters as intolerance in regard to the killing of a cow or the playing of music before a mosque may generate conflicts among the illiterate or the fanatic, among the educated, the differing attitudes towards socio-political norms are a more serious matter, as they may adversely affect the course of progressive legislation in the country.

II

The Preconditions of the Unity of Religions

It happens that the votaries of different religions look upon the respective teachings of those religions as sacred and infallible. Most of the major religions of the world claim to have their own revealed scriptures, whose teachings are held to be ultimate and infallible truths. Other important religions claim to be based on the teachings of omniscient and infallible prophets. Thus Buddha and Mahavira are regarded by their followers to have been omniscient teachers. The circumstance poses an intriguing problem before thoughtful observers not wholly committed to one or other religious tradition. The problem may be stated as follows: How can the conflicting claims and the divergent views of the different religious scriptures and teachers be reconciled?

Seeing that these scriptures and teachers often present us with conflicting accounts of the constitution and the course of the universe, and of man's place and destiny in it, how is an uncommitted observer to make a decision as to the correct and dependable view of the matter? It is amazing that the votaries of different religions should fail to appreciate this genuine difficulty of all honest enquirers.

The only way out of this difficulty, and one which may prepare a genuine ground for the meeting of different religions, to our mind, is the rejection of the dogma of the infallibility of any and all scriptural and prophetic teachings. The rejection is consistent with all that the sociologists and historians of culture and civilization have so far discovered about different ages and different peoples. It is noteworthy that the representatives and spokesmen of different religious traditions, one and all, are anxious to maintain that the teachings of their cherished faith do not essentially conflict either with science or with the modern values. This shows that, even in the eyes of the religious leaders, scientific attitude and some other values have come to require undeniable prestige. It frequently happens that a certain tenet of a religion which seems to conflict with the findings of science and the value attitudes of the modern man, is twisted and interpreted by the votaries of the religion concerned in a manner that makes it palatable to the modern mind. It is surprising that men dedicated to religious life should not mind being deliberately dishonest in the cause of their cherished scripture. They obviously attach greater importance to a creed than to truth itself. These clever interpreters, however, are seldom inclined to have the same generous treatment given to other creeds and their respective scriptures.

There can be no doubt that the more active supporters of a religious creed are generally those who have been intensively and systematically conditioned to accepting its tenets and dogmas; it can also be inferred from their behaviour that they have not been conditioned with equal strength to seeking and accepting the truth. The circumstance makes them unfit to appreciate the viewpoints of other religions. The only way in which such people may be made to realize their mistake seems to be the following: they should be forced to view the situation of religious conflict from the stand point of the rival religious creeds.

Apart from the highly conditioned religious fanatics and bigots there are honest, god-fearing believers who consider it blasphemous to question the authority of their scriptures. Such persons, however, are seldom aggressive, they are usually willing

to concede to others the right to have similar respect for their several scriptures. Such persons would usually prefer not to be confronted with the problem of reconciling the discordant teachings and the conflicting practical attitudes of the followers of different religions. However, for the benefit of believers who would also like to find a solution to the aforesaid conflicts, the following considerations may be offered. Even granted that the truths of this or that religion were revealed to a particular prophet or teacher by the Godhead itself, it may be conceded as a possibility that the expression of these truths in spoken or written language by that teacher or prophet was an imperfect achievement, for two reasons. First, the expression might have been hindered or obstructed by the inevitable shortcomings of a mortal recipient of the revelation concerned; secondly, the expression might also have been influenced by the prevailing idiom and the spiritual level of the age and culture to which the teacher under reference belonged. Indeed, there are very good reasons to believe that the two factors mentioned above are likely to leave their impression on the teachings of the greatest prophets and the holiest scriptures. On an impartial scrutiny, this will be found to be true not only of the Rigveda and the Old Testament but also of the Quran and the Bhagavadgita.

Yet another consideration, calculated to promote mutual tolerance, may be proffered to the honest and well meaning believers. The Indian religious tradition has propounded the helpful concept of *adhikari bheda*. According to this concept the wise religious teachers, such as the Buddha, varied their teachings and the emphasis on different elements in those teachings and doctrines, so as to suit the abilities and temperaments of the different sets of beneficiaries or recipients. The socio-cultural conditions and the intellectual and spiritual potentialities of a people make them receptive to one kind of teaching rather than another, and the prophetic teachers acting as vehicles of God adjust their teachings according to the needs and temperaments of the people concerned. Viewed in this light the gospels of different religious scriptures and teachers would appear to be not so much conflicting and divergent as complementary to one another.

The suggestion that the scriptures of different religions should be looked upon as complementary to one another accords well with what is known about the history of man's culture in its various manifestations. The different scriptures in the forms in which they have been handed down to us, are the works of

religious geniuses of differing temperaments and calibres who thought and believed that they had been inspired by God or Godhead. So far as the atheistic religions like Buddhism and Jainism are concerned they do not make any reference to a divinity responsible for inspiring their founders. On the contrary, they affirm faith in the omniscience of those teachers themselves. In any case, even the divine revelation is filtered through the minds of the inspired teachers before it actually reaches mankind. Now it is well-known that the cultural creations of geniuses in other fields, e.g. literature, music, mathematics, etc., are complementary to one another in the sense that, far from being in any sense antagonistic to one another, they tend to strengthen and develop their special subject in different ways or directions. Viewed in this light the gifted thinkers and authors belonging to the same tradition exhibit less radical differences than those belonging to different and more distant traditions. Thus, while the Elizabethan dramatists differ among themselves in some respects, their differences from the French classical playwrights are greater and of a more radical nature. Both the British and the French dramatic traditions, however, display still greater differences, particularly as regards their moral and spiritual problems and conflicts in respect to the Sanskrit drama. Likewise, in the field of religion, there are fewer and less radical differences between the several faiths of Semitic origin than between these faiths on the one hand and Buddhism and Jainism on the other.

The above observation leads to another. The encounter of different traditions in any field tends to set up the processes of cross-fertilization which result in enhanced creativity of the interacting traditions. This may very well happen in the field of religion provided that the representatives of these cease to swear by the completeness and exclusive truth or validity of their respective revealed gospels.

The analogy between religious revelations and cultural creations in other fields may be extended in another direction. The creations of different artists belonging either to the same or different traditions exhibit perfections of different kinds. In the different areas of the so-called humanities, including art, literature and philosophy, great works may claim validity of a peculiar kind, but not truth understood in the logical or even the scientific sense. I use the expression "even" in connection with scientific truth, for that truth is necessarily tied up with hypotheses and theories that can hardly claim literal correspondence with physical facts. The truth of a religious gospel, ideal or value is

analogous to the validity or acceptability of a work of art rather than to the asserted content of a logical or factual proposition. Just as the diverse works of art give expression to aesthetic realities or values in different and divergent forms from different angles and with emphasis on different aspects of those realities or values, similarly religious revelations or scriptures seek to define religious life or the ideal religious man from their several angles with varying emphasis on this or that aspect of that life or the ideal. This may be made clear by reference to some classical definitions or descriptions of the religious ideal. The second Chapter of the **Bhagavadgita** contains a brief yet excellent description of the ideal saint of Hindu conception, called the **sthitaprajña** or the man of steady mind or firm understanding. It would be difficult indeed to find a comparable short description of the ideal religious person so conceived in any other scripture of the world. The **Sermon on the Mount** is likewise an incomparable document and so are some sections of the **Dhammapada**. For one thing this shows that none of the scriptures may claim to be the exclusive creations of an Omniscient Being. The **Bhagavadgita** is not regarded as a revealed scripture, but its description of the **sthitaprajña** can compare—I was going to say compare favourably—with any passage in any of the Upanishads. The unequal quality of different parts of the so-called revealed texts also goes against the dogma of their being creations of an omniscience. Surely, it would be absurd to maintain, as an explanation of the unequal literary quality of different parts of a revelation, that the inspiration, and the powers of composition of even an omniscient being fluctuate like those of a merely human genius.

III

The Scriptures of the world contain not only descriptions of the ideal religious persons or the ideal religious life, but also outlines of schemes for man's institutional life, ethico-social and political.

We have already alluded to the belief, widely entertained by the Hindus, that the scheme of four varnas or castes is sanctioned by the Vedas, e.g. the 'Purusha Sukta' of the **Rigveda**. The scheme has been thoroughly elaborated by the **Manu Samhita**, which is considered second in authority only to the Vedas. Most of the religious scriptures of the world, including the **Rigveda** and the **Manusmriti**, mention the institution of kingship with approval and even uphold the doctrine of the divinity and divine

rights of the king. The revolutionary growth of political institutions during the modern times, that has been responsible for creating and setting up democratic and socialistic forms of government in most of the progressive societies has rendered obsolete the doctrine in question. Thus, in practice, the followers of different religions no more look to their scriptures for guidance in regard to their political and economic institutions. In theory, however, the scriptural teachings regarding these matters are not openly questioned and repudiated. As a consequence, spokesmen of different religions are not being properly helpful to progressive leaders and reformers or to the Government in their fight against such undesirable institutions as caste and polygamy. It is high time that people, particularly those of India, realized that religion proper has little or nothing to do with the social, economic and political institutions needed by a people, and that the question of the proper shape of these institutions is better left to socio-political scientists and thinkers, philosophers and reformers. All that religion may be expected to do in these matters is to supply the general framework of norms and values which should govern the life of the citizens in a general way. No religion which pitches itself, by advocating the cause of outmoded practices and reactionary policies against the important economic and political interests of the people or the modern welfare state, has a chance of obtaining a serious hearing. In the history of Europe the Church has occasionally sought to interfere with and usurp some of the functions of the state; the attempt has invariably led to long-drawn conflicts between the spokesmen of religion and the representatives of the state. Such a state of affairs invariably leads to the growth of mundane concerns both in the church and in society in general, thus injuring the cause for which religion stands. Religious life and sensibility have generally flourished well in societies where religion and politics have agreed to confine their activities to their respective spheres.

On the other hand, the rulers of the world have ever wanted religion to ditto or support their policies, right or wrong. History shows that when and where the weight of the church or priests is thrown on the side of rulers and kings, the cause of justice and that of the poorer sections of society has generally suffered, thus rendering religion suspect in the eyes of those seeking eradication of social and economic inequities. Had religion and religious organizations remained true to their transcendental ideals and to the requirements of social justice, had they not succumbed or surrendered to the more mundane interests and stooped to flattering the powers that be, anti-religious creeds pleading the case of

the poor and the oppressed such as socialism and communism, would not have come into being and gained extensive support not only from the masses but also from the intelligentsia. As a matter of history much of the progress achieved by civilized people in the areas of political and social legislation, has come about in spite of the obstructive role played by the priesthood and the church, rather than through co-operation and encouragement offered by those agencies.

IV

The Content of the Unity of Religions

It was suggested above that religious teachers and organizations should confine themselves to the promotion of specifically religious ideals and values. Not that these values and ideals are entirely without bearing on man's social life. According to our conception the truly religious man is a man of supreme detachment, who refuses to struggle and fight for the competitive good that the world can offer. The attitude of total indifference to things for which men fight coupled with unconditional friendliness and compassion towards living beings in general and the human in particular make the religious man a model of virtuous disposition and conduct. Apart from what such a man can accomplish for the well-being of his fellow beings, the religious man sets an example of contented and peaceful life deriving sustenance and joy from noble impulses and friendly sentiments. As William James has remarked, 'The saintly group of qualities is indispensable to the world's welfare'.

Speaking humanistically, I would say that the contents of the unity of religions may be discovered by us through systematic reflection on the attitudes and dispositions that produce the saintly character. To us it is the personality and the character of the saint that constitute the core and essence of the religious way of life. Here again we are faced with a dilemma. The attitudes and impulses of the saint are regarded by him and others as being rooted in his faith, and the faiths of different saints differ as violently as the sects and creeds to which they belong. On the other hand, there is little possibility of the emergence and flowering of the saintly personality in the absence of an overpowering faith in a peculiar spiritual order.

Without denying the immense complexity of the problem presented by the diversity of faiths inspiring saintly lives I venture to assert that the problem in question is not altogether unique and insoluble. We are faced with similar problems in almost all the fields of culture. Different societies may prescribe similar laws while assigning different reasons for their enactment and enforcement. While admitting the greatness of Shakespeare in a general way important critics may assign different reasons for attributing greatness to that dramatist. A psychologist, a social philosopher, a humanist and a theist may all emphasize the importance of truthfulness in conduct, though each may have his own reasons for the emphasis. The psychologist may recommend truthfulness for man because the habit of telling lies may produce undesirable tensions; the social philosopher may emphasize virtue in the interest of social weal and harmony; the humanist may condemn lying as unworthy of a rational and upright being; and the theist may condemn "bearing false witness" in the name of God's commandments and the possibility of divine anger and punishment. I am trying to suggest that an identical course of conduct may be commended or prescribed by different parties for different considerations. From this it follows that the content of the unity of religions may be defined solely in terms of the character and conduct of the ideal religious persons, either without any reference whatever to the divergent faiths or dogmas, or in terms of considerations that are likely to be acceptable to the modern man.

Here another factor may also be taken into account. While the saints of all ages and climes have some virtues in common, they also differ from one another both in their attitudes towards the world and its creatures in their day-to-day bearing and conduct. Thus St. Francis of Assisi is unique in some respects even among the Christian saints. Likewise Jesus Christ differs from the Buddha no less than does Gandhi differ from Ramakrishna and Kabir from Tulsidas. Great saints, it would appear, differ from one another no less than do the great writers and artists and great philosophers. It also seems to be true that different religious traditions have tended to commend and admire different groups of saintly virtues and different types of saintly life. The relatively more catholic Hindu tradition recognizes four principal pathways to God or salvation, thereby according recognition to at least four types of saintly personages or ideals of religious life. These types correspond to four types of Yoga or spiritual discipline, i.e., the yoga of knowledge, the yoga of action, and the ways of

devotion and mystic contemplation. Even then, it may be asserted that the Indian tradition lays greater emphasis on detachment and on such moral virtues as self control, *ahimsa* and truthfulness, while the Christian tradition attaches greater importance to rendering loving service to one's fellow-beings and to the virtues of faith, hope and humility.

To summarize, the promotion of the unity of religions requires a negative and a positive programme of action. This programme should be carried on by the intellectual leaders of the different religions. On the negative side, while taking care not to undermine the peoples' sense of respect for the spiritual leaders and prophets, attempt should be made to make them see the historical, culture-relative and complementary character of different revealed scriptures or teachings. The same treatment should be given to the socio-political schemes prescribed by different religious texts. On the positive side, people should be encouraged to acquaint themselves with and to learn to admire the ideal religious personages belonging to different traditions. Finally, in order to combat the growing skepticism and cynicism in regard to not only the religious dogmas but also the religious values, new schemes of thought lending support to religious attitudes and values must be evolved by thinkers who do not owe exclusive allegiance to any particular set of scriptures or a particular religious tradition. This does not imply that the thinkers born to different cultural traditions should feel reluctant or even hesitant to proclaim and propagate what they consider to be the special merits and virtues of the traditions in question.