

HISTORY UNVEILS THE DIVISIVE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF RELIGION

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1. Introduction

A land with a gigantic population and its connatural demographic diversity, which made India proud for ages as the home or cradle of many religions, seems a matter of both social shame and historical scandal that the same religions should lately be seen as a ground of national conflict and confrontation. The scandal seems more acute, when it is, at the same time, commonly mouthed that all religions are essentially the same, which is why they are categorized under *religion*.

What, then, is that common essence of religions, which makes them compete with one another? Perhaps such a search will help us either to vacate or, at least, to understand the source of the scandal as necessary to existential history if not also to logical rationality. If the divinity is affirmed as the common essence of religions and the source of their rivalry, such divinity would appear irrational, because its rational consequence would be that what is divinely destined should be accepted as inevitable, without regret, resistance or the least sense of scandal. Under this assumption, rivalry would appear as normal as like-particles repelling each other in nature. But, as such logic justifies the conscientiously unjustifiable existential rivalry, there seems to be something undesirably irrational about it. Hence, the problem remains and calls for not only an alternative solution, but also a socially more realistic explanation.

Perhaps the most obvious and plausible explanation is that a change of perception has come about or is being brought about in the assessment of social processes and the values embedded therein. It pragmatically results in national pride shifting from unity in ethno-cultural diversity to its reduction to religio-cultural uniformity. I wish to focus this article on the nature of this change in the value and social process perception, because it affects the substantive political attitude and behaviour pattern towards

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people of other ethno-religious communities. Since it makes people simplistically to project and believe religious diversity to be the source of the problem of emotive integration at the national level, we must take a closer look at the very processes, which go on under the name and form of religion.

2. Need to Re-examine Religious Processes and Values

We must subject to question even our assumption about the logical commonalty between religions as natural. In other words, is logic built on universal human nature or on the particularity of cultures? As applied to religions, it becomes a question whether any religion, in its origin, is a matter of natural or cultural evolution. Two sets of answers are given to this question from the side of the religions themselves.

Theistic ones, such as the Vedic and Semitic group of religions, which attribute divine inspiration to their foundational scriptures as well as their oral seers or literate prophets, consider themselves, on that score, as divinely *revealed religions* and, as such, to be both wholly infallible and unchangeable. In this fashion, they evade the question addressed to them, by claiming themselves to have been divinely placed beyond the purview of both nature and human-made cultures. At its face value, this evasive answer was intended as an act of implicit faith in an apolitically theological rationality. But deep down, as we shall try to show, through its societal workings, inspirational theology was the most shrewdly veiled linguistic game of political power. In other words, it was a religious hierarchy-constructing ideology of gender and political domination.

Its implication is that religion itself is out-and-out an ethno-political history-making secular reality. But it is not honest enough to admit this in plainly experiential literal prose. Instead, it subconsciously seeks mythopoetical and metaphorical subterfuge in God so as to maintain the hierarchical system of rulers and their slaves or subordinates. The supernatural divinity is invoked so that rulers can at once exercise their power and hide that fact from the common knowledge of the ruled. Belief in the divinity behind the power of masters mystifies their unequal ruled mistakenly into assuming the hierarchically established social system into the rule or the kingdom of God.

3. Religion as Metaphorically Veiled Polity

Faith in the most diversely named divinity, thus, has been the most effective political strategy to ensure that the rulers' ideas become and

remain the politically socializing ideas of the ruled. Religion, then, was the regulating idea under which the ruling classes could perpetuate their power over the masses. Hence, it must have been people with such world-ruling ambitions of power, who assumed and claimed for themselves the divine inspiration or revelation for the words, which they perhaps ecstatically conjured up with their oral or writing tools. However, they also covered up that ambition through their spontaneously put-on states of ecstasy. Yet their words were believed as true, because they reflected the analogy their authors had perceived between cosmic creation and their own intuitive grasp about it, which they creatively expressed in the metaphorically or multifariously meaningful scriptures of these religions. On that score, they even went so far as to deny any human authorship to their scriptures. Subjectively, that was their direct way of honouring God as the impersonally universal revealer of himself to all, who were open to acknowledging his inspiration and authority. But there was also an ideologically veiled intension in reducing the human authorship of the scriptures to unknown or unknowable anonymity. That cynically cunning intent was to make whoever cited or spoke in God's name as fearfully obeyed by their hearers, as if they were in the directly life-threatening presence of the incomprehensible Almighty. Theological faith, therefore, could be either as benign as its genuine mystics or as manipulative and manipulated as its unscrupulously institutionalizing power-mongers.

4. Illustrations with Ancient Indian Religions

It was, possibly, in a context of such socio-political exploitation by unscrupulous power-mongers in ancient Indian history that the Buddha and the Tirtankara Mahavira dared, at the risk of being branded as atheists, to challenge the divine inspiration of the Vedas by attributing every effect to its empirically verifiable natural or human causes. They were not ashamed to have the systems they had initiated, to be wholly associated with secular-human creativity within concrete socio-historically caused evolution. In not having recourse to anything more than human inspiration, the Jainas and the Buddhists were more transparently honest to the socially verifiable ethical response than the Vedic musically mystifying system of symbolic cult at the sacred spaces, mostly accompanied with lots of animal sacrifice.

The cumulative social effect was that, in spite of Vedic traditionalists despising the Buddha and the Mahavira as atheistic materialists, their

socially convinced believers in religious India developed a cult of them among the more rationally-minded converts from popular and Vedic religion. At one time, the cult of the Buddha had got so widespread among the masses so much so that, in order to accommodate them into its fold, orthodox Vaishnavism went to the extent of declaring the Buddha one of the most human descents of the great Vishnu into India's politico-economic history. Belief in *avatars* was, perhaps, the finest instance within Indian cultural history, in the art of closing the gap between the religiously sacred and the politically secular. In shaping this theologically artistic contrivance, it came analogously close to Christianity.

5. Resistance to Missionary Religions

Even so, Hindus resent missionary religions, not to mention how much such religions are resentful among themselves because, in drawing their converts from among other native ethno-religious identities, they pose a threat of reduction in the demographic strength of the original ethnicities. Yet by breaking free from the practice of in-breeding endogamy, religious conversions introduce new blood and cultural exchange and enrichment through implicit or explicit exogamy. If Vedic Aryanism was resentful of missionary Buddhism and *ahimsa*-preaching Jainism, the Vedas themselves implicitly testify that it was due to that Vedic society being endogamous for racial purity as a strategy to propagate and perpetuate its own politico-military dominance through its hierarchical system of castes or *varnas*.

It should be less surprising that such a tradition resists conversion to more recent missionary religions of non-Indian origin than itself, such as Christianity and Islam. The resentment is due not only to the foreignness of these religions, but also to the historical fact that a new politico-military and economic hegemony followed in their wake. In the ideological use of scriptural inspiration for power, there was too much in common between them not to repel them politically from one another. Despite independent India's secular constitutional declarations, older historical phobias and new prejudices from perceived and on-going economic rivalries keep old fears alive. They project the past in such a way as a potential future possibility, that the religion of the realm could once again become the religion of the majority which comes into democratically elected power.

6. Christian Religious History

Even against such minority suppression-threatening potential of violent mass-power-based electoral politics, the incredible story of the birth and

growth of Christianity stands as a convincing demonstration of just the contrary possibility. It is a Gandhi-like firm belief in the this-worldly power and wisdom of hate-free suffering, actively to resist, withstand and win over every force that sought to repress it. Gandhi himself learnt this lesson from the gospels-depicted life of Jesus. Therein Gandhi located the inspiring power in the gospel-narrated life rather than in the gospels' narrations themselves. Locating inspiration in a text and its author was to misdirect its capacity from making a love-filled history towards making a hierarchically built hate-and-power-motivated institution. For all that, Jesus himself had not denied the inspiration of his native Israelite scriptures. He had, rather, on the basis of the inspiration of those scriptures, claimed himself as the incarnate fulfilment of scriptural prophecies, while criticizing the priestly class's capitalization of the cultic offerings and sacrifices made in the temple. Consequently, he met with as ambiguous a fate as the Buddha, making devout believers as well as sworn enemies among his own people. Palestinian Judaism of his time was a far less tolerant and theocratically more authoritarian social system than its Vedic Indian counterpart. The latter treated contraries as complementary to each other. Dualistic Judaism treated contraries as incompatible and mutually exclusive contradictions. Hence, it paid the non-dualistic Jesus back with as great a violence as the heroic non-violence, which he had taught and advocated through his graceful words and exemplary life and actions.

After Jesus, his disciples also were branded as atheists for taking their cult of him to the Jewish and non-Jewish people worldwide as the incarnationally death-suffering and resurrected son of God. This new Christian theology replaced the much-feared God of the Israeli patriarchs with Jesus as the resurrected royal messianic son and successor to the long-since extinct kingdom of David. But in projecting him as returning to judge his murderers and the rest of the world, which had refused to accept him, neo-Christianity had probably re-assimilated into itself the whole of the vindictiveness of politico-religious power, which it had suffered from the Mosaic brand of the all-male Jewish theology.

7. God-axis or Human-axis

The prominently outstanding message, however, is that, though they span many such mystifying religious dogmas, the God-axis of both the Vedic and the Semitic religions was really the axis of their ambitious rulers' power over their believing masses. Many Semitic prophets and Vedic seers

had effectively utilized it first for their own power by citing God's holy name as authoring or authorizing their own poetic compositions. Hence, all who were honoured through ethnic fan-culture as true prophets and seers will need to be reevaluated, insofar as they were closed on or against other ethnic identities; likewise, the priests and kings, who had played the same game of exclusive ethnic power in the name of their group's divinity versus other ethnic groups. They had used the religious system of beliefs and ritual practices to gain and retain their positions of social power and prestige through prejudice and phobia towards other ethnic groups.

The disciples of Jesus too were originally ethnic nationalists, who had built and focused their messianic political ambitions around Jesus. Their own ethnic priests, however, had got those dreams frustrated through their collusion with the Roman governor of the Palestine province. The disciples could have thought of violently retaliating on this priestly class and the Roman power. But they were yet unequal to them. So, they wisely followed Jesus' teaching and example of non-violent endurance, while yet waiting patiently like their old patriarchs for the time when their prolonged hopes could be fulfilled at least in a generation of their distant descendants. They could even then greet and welcome it as the fulfilment of their long-cherished desire of earthly political power.

8. Conclusion

Within the purview of the analogy of the indigenous and exotic religions of India, covered in this brief survey, we might be warranted to draw the following inference. The 'Ram'-axis of the BJP and of the Hindutva forces in India today is no more an axis of pure religiosity, than the Christ- or the prophet-axis of the Christians and the Muslims has ever been, but of pragmatically symbolic power-political identities. Pure religiosity and spirituality exist nowhere today in any concretely visible, isolated form. It is as incarnately legitimizing ethno-political and economic interests and identities that religion and spirituality become concrete social sub-systems reinforcing the overall cultural superstructure. In a multi-ethno-religious and linguistic national scenario like India, no realistic politics can afford to exclude any ethnic segment and justice to it without jeopardizing the integrity of its federal constitution. Hence, a proportionate share in civil rights and responsibilities would seem to be the ideal way to include and integrate all segments into the national identity. Further, what is said about religions in India would apply correspondingly to the religions of the world at large.