

A RELIGIOUS MEDITATION ON AYODHYA

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Ayodhya was, and still is, a sacred place for Muslims. They built a mosque on its grounds. Ayodhya has been believed to be a sacred place for Hindus. That is why they (some of them) demolished the mosque. They claim that before the Muslim 'occupation' on those sacred grounds there was a Hindu temple. It is almost sure that if the Hindu temple was built there (if it was) it was built on a pre-Hindu sacred shrine. We may call it proto-Hindu if we prefer. It is certain that the historical Hinduism of *Rama* was not there since the beginnings of time. If that place was sacred, it was sacred before Hinduism, and it will remain sacred after Islam.

In the same manner that one should criticize a certain Christian vision according to which Christianity is the achievement of all religions as the so-called fulfilment theology used to defend, one should criticize the view that claims Hinduism is the fulfilment of the so-called tribal, *dravidian* or proto-indic forms of religions – in spite of the fact that there is much to say for a primordial human religiousness. Yet, each religious tradition has its concrete boundaries and geographic-historical limitations.

In one word: no religion has the monopoly on religion. We may call this latter religiousness for clarity sake. This religiousness is the religious dimension of Man, expressed then in institutionalized religions or in less established forms of the same.

The *adivasis* could have also laid a claim on that holy spot. They have not done it either because for them any place of worship is good enough or because they had no voice in the matter—as they have it hardly on any other matter in the modern world. We call ourselves 'civilised' because we live in *civitates*, in cities, and we call tribals 'savages' because they live in forests, which is what the word means. We should begin with changing our language.

India is a secular state, not profane state. I speak of sacred secularity, not secularism. Secularity stands for the conviction that the spatio-temporal structures of the world are not irrelevant for the human being, and are

essential for the religious life and even necessary to reach the ultimate destiny of Man- in whatever way this destiny may be conceived of.

I may continue this religious reflection using a christic language. This language belongs to what I call 'christianness' as a particular form of a religious experience, not necessarily identical to what is generally called Christianity as an institutionalized religion. Christianity is not involved in the Ayodhya affair, but the religious experience of any human beings, is. Ayodhya is not a private affair between Hindus and Muslims. Both communities accept and recognize transcendence. And transcendence, by definition, is nobody's exclusive and private property. They dispute not a piece of land, but that particular spot which has for them a unique value because it is a place where transcendence shines in a special way. They dispute a sacred place, not a spot of terrain. The claim of Palestinians on Jerusalem is not because it is a nice city, but because it is Al-Qud, the Holy (city), a sacred space. And for the same reason the Israelites are not satisfied with Tel Aviv (which is more modern and 'comfortable'). Religion cannot be encapsulated in neat little boxes. This is the human condition. I repeat, the Ayodhya incident is not an exclusive concern of two communities or two religions. It is a symptom of both the scandal which religions give all over the world and the insufficiency of dealing with the religious dimension of Man with merely political measures. Northern Ireland, Sudan, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Punjab,..... are neither exclusive political problems nor exclusively religious strifes.

But back to Ayodhya and my christic reflection. "The time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" (John, IV, 21), which means: the time is coming when people will approach the Mystery of Reality neither in Ayodhya, Mount Meru, Mecca, Rome, Badrinath, Sarnath- nor much less, of course, in Wall Street, Capitol Hill, the Supermarket, the World Bank, or any Parliament: the time is ripe to discover that true worship is the recognition of our infinite dignity in ourselves, and at the same time and by the same breath, our incapacity of doing it isolated, closing selfishly ourselves in our contingent shells. Or, quoting from the same source: true worship is "in spirit and in truth." "In spirit", that is, everywhere, by any sincere form, also in those sacred place indeed, but not exclusively, and perhaps for many not ever preferentially there. The Spirit is everywhere,

blows where she wills, when she so decides and specially how she wishes, so that nobody can, a priori, exclude any blowing of the Spirit because one does not like it.

But also "in truth", which means not only in truthfulness, that is sincerely, but also with authenticity, that is in those forms, times, and in those places which for us are meaningful, revelatory or full of grace. Truth is always relational. It implies a relation with us. Truth is always concrete. It is not purely objective, because we are involved in it. It is not purely subjective, because more than "us" is also involved in it. In sum, Ayodhya is real religious issue.

I do not say that institutionalized religions should be abolished. All the antireligious movements have indeed by becoming other belief-systems, churches and, in the last instance, new religions. We should not, we cannot, throw away the baby with the bathwater. The baby is too big, religions are too ancient and powerful- and living. I say that the time has come for a religious reflection inside and outside the very religious communities, a time for asking ourselves two basic questions. Is our record so clean that 'we' (Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Humanists,.) can be simply satisfied in condemning the other and proceed 'business as usual' allowing only of some reforms? Cannot we find within our respective tradition enough elements for a radical transformation? (*metanoia*, would be the christic word.)

We cannot set back the clock of the temporal flow of reality. To rebuild, be a new mosque or a new temple or both, on the same spot would mean that we come to a merely political and superficial compromise, and ask for more trouble, the day in which, just separated by a wall, two big congregations meet and some minor incident ignites a new conflagration, as we have witnessed so many times. It is politically short-sighted to put them side by side and letting them feel that each 'party' is victorious.

But reason is deeper that political expediency or even prudence. The reason is that if religions are living realities they cannot be satisfied with looking at the past for inspiration for the future. They have to look into the present. The present has also revelatory character- to speak a religious language. And the present tells us in unambiguous term that the situation

both in religious consciousness and in political awareness has changed since all those established religions come into existence. A new step from all religious communities is required. Religions need inner transformation.

I am not proposing to convert Ayodhya into a desert place for nobody as a monument of religious intolerance. I am not proposing either a facile eclectic spot for the spiritual picnic of shallow spiritualities. I am proposing a Temple of Understanding, a Mosque of Reconciliation, a Church of Love, a Gurdwara of Peace, a Gompa of Compassion, a Stupa of Reverence, a Forest of Joy, a Tree of Insight, a House of Fire and especially a Hall for the Word. For the moment a place where people could meet precisely to figure out what we should do, how we should live a more natural, human, and divine Life in spirit and in truth.

In the midst of Athens, when religions were proliferating in Greece as much as in India today, there was an altar erected "To the Unknown God". Could there not be in Ayodhya a shrine consecrated to the Unknowable Divinity?