

RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

Challenges and Prospects

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One of the few issues which exercise a strong control over the intellectual discussion of our period is the relation between religion, philosophy and science. At the same time we have to recall that this discussion is not of a newly generated one but is of at least several centuries old. At present we are passing through an age in which science and technology dominates the temper of human life. It is true that this scientific culture gave us a new power and insight. By this we mean that we are able to manipulate the world in which we are living and fathom the mysteries of nature. At the same time we have to acknowledge that we are passing through an age of crisis. This is an age in which we are facing the crisis of religion, philosophy, culture and humanity itself. Ours is an attempt to bring out the nature and scope of the crisis.

1. Culture as the Germinal Ground of Religion and Philosophy

Religion, philosophy and science have often been thought to be in opposition, but it was not always so. A study of human history shows that these three were closely associated with each other from the very dawn of humanity itself. The apparent conflict between them is a product of history itself. When we search for their origin in history we have to believe that they emerged out of humanity's self-awareness and wonder with the world. It is the product of both a collective and individual passion for wisdom. Their origin can be attributed neither to any particular event nor to a particular culture. What we can say about their origin is that they appear in the cosmos as curious phenomenon, which cannot easily be explained in terms of physiology or physical necessity.

The incessant curiosity of human mind has posed problems, which are identical but fundamental. The answers given to them by philosophers are not only different but also pluralistic and even contradictory. No culture, no people can claim that their answers are absolute and the only valid solutions for the fundamental questions. Thus we can even say that philosophy and religion emerged in different parts of the world as unique events.

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2. The Lure of Philosophy

The traditional philosophical endeavours which go back not only to the Greeks but also to Indians and Chinese have always tried to encompass religion, philosophy and science in their realm. But in Western tradition, ancient Greeks always believed in the power of reason and accepted it as supreme to explain the meaning of reality. The different schools of thought in the past, whether it was rationalistic or empiricistic, idealistic or materialistic although were in conflict with each other, all rested on the common claim that reason by itself was able to establish absolute certainty and never questioned the validity of reason to establish truth.

Philosophy thus emerged as one of the noblest of human tasks in human history. Once strongest men were ready to sacrifice their life for the sake of philosophy. Socrates chose to be her martyr rather than to live in flight before her enemies. Plato risked himself twice to win a kingdom for her. Once thrones and Papacies feared philosophy and imprisoned her votaries lest dynasties should fall. Athens exiled Protagoras and Alexander trembled before Hypatia. Regents and kings hounded Voltaire from their land and Karl Marx had to flee from his fatherland in the name of philosophy. Dionysius and his son offered Plato the mastery of Syracuse. Alexander's royal aid made Aristotle the most learned man in the history.

Those were great days for philosophy, when she took bravely all knowledge for her province, and threw herself at every turn into the forefront of the mind's advance towards wisdom. Men honored her then; nothing was held nobler than the love of truth. Philosophy was not a timid spinster hiding in locked towers from the rough usage of the world; her bright eyes did not fear the day. Once she was many-colored light that filled with warmth and radiance the profoundest souls. Philosophy thus occupied a place par excellence among the different human sciences.

3. Religious Origin of Philosophy

Religion and philosophy were very closely associated with each other from the very beginning of human being himself. In a world in which people had so little control over their life, the notion of fate naturally dominated their life. In this enviable and extremely vulnerable situation, life was unpredictable, often tragic and therefore both precious and lamentable. In such a situation, the whims and passions of god and goddesses and the uncertainties of fate dominated the sphere. Thus the

reality of religion had opened the way towards the 'beyond' from the very beginning of humanity itself.

Greek philosophy originated in the realm of Greek religious context. It was in Greece alone that philosophy achieved her autonomy and was explicitly distinguished from religion. Greek philosophy emerged in history as a dissident progressivism with Greek religion, a refused legitimization by the past. Thus Socrates ridicules the gods in whom the common people believed. And philosophy emerged as a natural illumination outside the realm of Greek mythical religion.

4. Scientific Origin of Philosophy

It was Greeks who have invented science, as we now know it. Greeks invented it by searching for the intelligible impersonal permanence underlying the world of change and by hitting upon the brilliant idea of a generalized use of scientific theory: they proposed the idea of assuming a permanent, uniform, abstract order from which the changing world of observation could be deduced. Greek science must be seen as the origin of all that has followed. It was the triumph of order brought by abstract thought into the chaos of immediate experience, and it remained characteristic of Greek scientific thought to be interested primarily in knowledge and understanding and only very secondarily in practical usefulness.

5. Modernity and Its Challenges

We are living in a culture in which science and technology dominates every aspects of human life. Science is capable of taking us to the boundaries of science, belief and ethics. It is also a culture in which the ordinary and natural way of looking at ourselves and other realities also changed. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that something has gone wrong with the course of scientific developments in our own culture. Today men are not certain about progress and future. There is a vague uneasiness and a fear that civilization itself may be in another period of decline. There is no single explanation for this change in mood, attitude and outlook.

The development of positive sciences, whatever its advantages, exposes man to a number of reductions which are death-dealing to all that defines him most radically and specifically as man. Seen within this exclusive perspective, what remains is measurable man, i.e., man disfigured, downgraded, made into an object. The humanity of man in its

irreducible originality is missing. Philosophy is not innocent of similar over simplification. In older times, idealism and false spiritualism reduced man to a disembodied cogito with no relationship with the world. The existentialism of Sartre reduces man to an absolute freedom, emancipated both from any link with ideal values and from limitation by any determining forces. Positivism tends to reduce man to various empirical conditions, which surround his life and his activity.

6. Crisis of Science and Technology

The present day crisis in our civilization has something to do with the uncontrolled growth of science and technology. Science has wrought our ruin, because it has given mankind the power to destroy itself. Science in the modern civilization controls and guides most of what we think and do. When a crisis hits the nation it is to the scientists that governments turn, believing that they will be presented with the facts and the remedy in a way that religion and philosophy cannot do. One of the reasons is the tremendous advance of science in the centuries preceding our own and the development of technology as a result of its research. It is true that booming of industries, development of techniques have really provided a better life for man. Along with these developments we learn that these progresses equally suppresses the hidden heart of man. Beyond the progress of science human freedom itself is regulated by a rational order. Thus science and technology in our modern culture appear as a power of destruction.

7. Crisis of Religion

Many philosophers of our modern culture characterize our modern period as one, which is facing crisis of religion. Religion and God have lost much their influence upon men. The sense of the world perfectly and very simply ordained to this God is also lost. Actually religions have lost their guiding role in modern civilization. As a result the modern religions became powerless before the human consciousness. Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel are the few among many who have sensed the crisis of religion in our modern age.

8. Crisis of Morality

Our world is experiencing a fundamental crisis: a crisis of morality. This crisis is expressed in different realms of global economy, ecology and politics etc. Hundreds of millions of human beings on our planet increasingly suffer from unemployment, poverty, hunger and the

destruction of their families. Hope for a lasting peace among nations is slipping away from us. There are tensions between the sexes and generations. Children die, kill and killed. More and more countries are shaken by corruption in politics and business. It is increasingly difficult to live together peacefully in our cities because of social, racial and ethnic conflicts, the abuse of drugs, organized crime and even anarchy. Even neighbors often live in fear of one another. Our planet continues to be ruthlessly plundered. A collapse of the ecosystem consequently threatens us.

9. Crisis of Globalisation

Humanity tends to become more and more self-sufficient because of its technological achievements. But discovering the riches of creation and putting them generally to selfish use are no guarantee that such exploitative systems will not eventually crumple. Tragic consequences of this type of achievements have already started to show their awesome faces in our own era itself. Presently, the world is at the dawn of a new era, an era in which economic and political power are being concentrated in the hands of a few countries and multinational corporations and within countries, in the hands of a few people. This phenomenon is known as globalisation. At present globalisation poses a grave threat to our modern culture and human life.

10. Urgent Need for Renewal

Today as in Socrates' time, man is 'absent' from himself. In the course of his daily round he passes by himself, brushes himself in passing the way one anonymous pedestrian does another; but he does not encounter himself. The individual lives in his own vicinity, with himself, but not very much of himself. We live, act and think at the level of our outward appearance and our social personality, which is like a mask interposed between us and ourselves, between us and others. We live like a 'double' of ourselves rather than as our true self. Habit alienates us from ourselves, blind reflexes guide us. What is needed for the moment is revival. Modernity has dug its own grave and now people are looking for something new.

As part of the renewed quest for something new people are moving towards religions and magic in search of an answer. There are philosophers who have supported this quest for the irrational both in philosophical and religious realm. Another factor we find along with this

quest for revival is the increased call for giving due respect for human being and human situation. A great number of contemporary philosophers, especially existentialists, have given considerable attention to the discussion of human person so as to evidence his dignity and value. They always consider the individual human situations in its unrepeatable uniqueness.

11. Conclusion

Throughout human history from the time of Socrates to our own modern era the human race has sought answers to the most fundamental questions of human life: who are we and why are we here? We do believe that the age-old questions, which the great philosophers of human history have asked for over twenty five hundred years, have greater value even in this age of science and technology. To be human being is to ask these questions. If we human beings are material bodies, if we are only meaningless collections of atoms, it is nonetheless the case that we are the only known collections of atoms in the universe that can reflect upon the universe and ask such questions as, what is real and what does it mean to be human being? But great philosophers of the ancient past are not hollow men, they are filled with enormous vitality and with the profound convictions that it is of fundamental importance to raise these questions and to answer them in the way they do. These great philosophers are the source for us to combat the problems, which we are facing today.

What we need today is to have life itself, its meaning and relative values, interpreted for us. This has always been philosophy's task, which has sometimes been defined as the cultural study of meanings and values, or as the interpretation of life. What we need in the present moment is an image of man himself that bears a new, stark, more nearly naked and more questionable aspect of man.