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MATERIALS TOWARD AN INDO-WESTERN UNDER- STANDING OF THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

Person signifies what is noblest in the whole of nature. (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. I, 29, 2)

It is usually through a reference to Kant that the notion of dignity of the human person is defined. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, (p. 429 of the critical edition) he writes:

Rational nature exists as an end in itself.... The practical imperative will thus be as follows: So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means.

The dignity of man is thus to be an end in himself owing to his rational nature. It is for the same reason that all human beings are declared to be equal in dignity and rights in the very first article of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are *endowed with reason and conscience* and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.)

Let us examine how this notion of human dignity originated in the diverse cultures of India and the West.

1. In Vedic India

In the Vedas, we find several hymns to Speech or to Thought. For instance, the following verses on Thought:

That which is foresight, consciousness and persistence,
Which is the immortal light within beings,
Apart from which no act can be performed, my Thought,
That immortal through which all things are apprehended,
The past, the present, the future(....).

That which masterfully drives the humans,
 Like a good charioteer drives his steeds with his reins,
 The swift, the quickest of all, which is based in the heart,
 My Thought — may it conceive happy things!

(*Vajaseshiya Samhita xxxiv 3-6*)

Thought or the Mind (*manas*) is viewed here as the dynamic principle which is the sovereign characteristic of man. It is not simply a psychological but a cosmic principle, as already in Rv 129, 4 and in numerous passages of the Upaniṣads. For instance, *Kena Up*: "moved, propelled by whom will Thought fly?" It makes the greatness of man:

He knows tomorrow, he knows the world and what is not the world. By the mortal he desires the immortal, being thus endowed.. Man is the sea. He is above all the world. Whatever he reaches, he desires to go beyond it.

(*Aitareya Āraṇyaka II, 1, 3*)

2. In Ancient Greece

In Greece, we have first the famous text of Sophocles in his *Antigone*:

There are in the world many marvels but none greater than man...Speech, thought swift like the wind, aspiration whence are born cities; all that he taught to himself as well as he could, while making shelters for himself.

Here, the thought which makes man's greatness is identified as the technical and political thought which (like the architectonic *māyā* of the Vedas) raises buildings and creates organized republics.

The same sort of thinking is continued in the *Protagoras* of Plato and its famous myth of Epimetheus and Prometheus. Epimetheus provided qualities so lavishly on the animals devoid of reason that he had none left to endow man with. Prometheus, his brother, then stole from the workshop of Hephaistos and Athene the technical arts and the fire they required and endowed man with them. Thus provided, man could build shelters but he could not organize his society. Then Zeus, worried lest man became extinct, sent Hermes to men "bearing reverence and justice (*aida te*

kai dikên) to be the ordering principle of republics and the bonds of friendship and conciliation...." Hermes asked Zeus how he should impart justice and reverence among men: Should he distribute them as the arts are distributed; that is to say, to a favoured few only, or should he give them to all? — To all, said Zeus, for states cannot exist if a few only share in the virtues as in the arts." (320-323)

But it is in *The Republic* that Plato manifests his position in its full complexity. Human excellence is not only an education to the political values but a comprehension of the *ideals* to which the state itself is to subject itself. The excellence and thus the "dignity" of men cannot be maintained by a bare political art but only by a political art axed upon the absolute Good which is the object of philosophical contemplation.... The human dignity is thus fed on the divine Excellence.

For Aristotle also the dignity of political excellence attaches to the fact that one is a citizen entitled to share in the democratic government of the city. This excludes foreigners and slaves. In India similarly, human excellence belongs to the man belonging to one of the *varnas*, especially the upper three; a *varna* being a class of people entitled to share in some way or other in sacrifices. This excludes the aliens and the outcastes.

It is with the Stoics that a truly universal notion appears. For the Stoic, that is estimable (*axios*) which conforms to nature. Conformity to the nature of humanity and thus to the great whole makes the dignity (*axia*) of a human person. It is on account of this sense of the universal that early Christians felt an affinity with the Stoics and made use of their philosophy rather than of another during the first two or even three centuries A.D.

But Christianity introduces a bigger change in the notion of that dignity. It is now because every human, whether free or slave, is a creature "in the image and resemblance" of the absolute God and is assured of salvation through Jesus Christ that all are equally worthy of a fundamental worthiness which the world cannot give.

3. In India

In India, it is with the apparition of the conception of *mokṣa* and its accompaniment *saṅnyāsa* that a similar change begins. *Mokṣa* is a new value, antinomic to the first three goals of man and which

demands renunciation to them. *Saṅnyāsa* is this renunciation which sets a man in the margin of society and excludes him from all his rights and duties to it. But paradoxically they raise him to a new status of excellence, this time in connection with the eternal realities, the Brahman (or negatively *nirvāṇa*), immortality, perfect knowledge, transcendence of all that is finite. The *saṅnyāsīn* is not only venerated but he is the true individual, completely on his own, detached from *varṇa* and caste, indifferent to all differences of status; he has secured his personality through a free option made with reference to a transcending aim. This is what we find in the Upaniṣads or, in reverse, in Theravāda Buddhism.

Yet, the chasm is too deep that separates him from the caste people. An important advance is made by *King Aśoka* through the new *dharma*, best designated as *Law of Piety* which he proclaims in his rock-or pillar-edicts. It is a civil version of the Buddhist *dharma* adapted to ordinary citizens. What it conveys chiefly throughout is *Respect*; no wonder that his concept of *dharma* is rendered in Greek as *eusebeia* (respectful piety) in the bilingual (Greek-Aramaic) inscription discovered in 1957 at Kandahar, Afghanistan. He describes what it prescribes as follows:

This is excellent, this should be done...right treatment of slaves and servants, obedience to mother and father, liberality to friends, acquaintances and kinsmen, gifts to *śramaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas*, and abstention from slaughter of living beings (*Rock Edict XI*), *Pillar Edict VII* adds helpful sympathy towards the wretched and miserable. Concludes *Rock Edict IX*: These and other similar acts constitute, what may be called *dharma-mangala*, the ceremonial of the Law of Piety, which ought to replace the worthless ceremonials so far used for birth, marriage, illness, departure on a journey, etc.

This is no longer a purely ethnic *dharma* but one imbued with a sense of universality. "The welfare of all people (*sarva-loka-hitam*) is my highest duty," says the king in *Rock Edict VI*. To the special "great ministers of the Law of Piety" (*dharma-mahāmātras*) who supervise the observance of his new Law, he says:

You are set over thousands of living beings that you may surely secure the affection of all men, for all men are my children. (*First Separate Rock Edict of Kalinga*)

This is why he extends the proclamation of his *dharma* to the Greek and other kingdoms beyond the limits of his empire. To the officers in charge of faraway border districts or forest tracts, he says to excite their zeal:

All men should be consoled (by you) so that they think, "the king is to us as a father; he sympathises with us as he sympathises with himself; we are to the king as his children".... You are capable of consoling them and ensuring their welfare and happiness pertaining to both this world and the next. (*Second Separate Rock Edict*)

They have been appointed...for the welfare and happiness of both hired servants and masters, brāhmaṇas and wealth-owners, old people and helpless ones, and to free citizens from hardship. They are employed to see to the reversal of judicial sentences, the freedom from hardship and the release of prisoners who are responsible for children, or engulfed by misery, or too old. (*Rock Edict V*)

His deeds prove his deep sense of the dignity of all and, so it seems, preferentially of those whose life is most harsh:

He has procured medical attendance for men and beasts even beyond his dominion (*Rock Edict III*), planted medicinal herbs, roots, fruittrees, banyantrees along the roads, and mangoorchards; he has dug wells at every half a *krosa*, provided salestalls and wateringplaces for travelling men and beasts (*Rock Edict II*); he and his queens have distributed charities; he has taken pleasure in forgiving and procured amnesties to prisoners 25 times during the first 26 years after his consecration. (*Pillar Edict V*)

Asoka's *Dharma* did not endure because it displeased the tenants of the Brahmanic *Dharma*. Within fifty years from his death, his dynasty comes to an end (B.C. 185) and the strongly reactionary Śuṅga takes up its succession.¹ (B.C. 176)

1. For an integral presentation of Asoka's Law of Piety, see my "Indian Roots for the Lord-Vassal Relationship in the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius." in E. DE MEULDER (Ed.), *When Two Great Hearts Meet* (Allahabad: St Paul, 1978), 192-220. Reprinted in *Ignis Studies* 6-7, 1984, 5-39. Also in *Indian Journal of Spirituality* 6 (1993), 191-206 294-321.

However, a more durable advance, probably favoured by this Brahmanical revival is set in motion by the Bhagavadgītā and its raising of *bhakti* to the religious level. Through *bhakti*, the goal of the Upaniṣadic *saṅnyāsin* is obtainable by everyone; and everyone means, as in Buddhism, every male or female whether of caste or non-caste. Like Stoicism in the West, Buddhism had here played a universalizing role; but, due to its teaching of no substance and no person, it cannot be said to have rooted in an idea of the universality of the dignity of the person. This is rather done by the Gītā in the name of the Brahman manifested as Krishna. And it is done in such a way that the individual person is not cut away from its associations with his fellows but linked with them 'for the fight' of secular life.

Henceforth there will be frequent assertions that a human birth is preferable to others because it ushers in the possibility of salvation (*mokṣa*). But the belief in the possibility of the same soul being reborn in all sorts of bodies prevents the choice of a special term like in the West the term 'person' to designate the status of the human being.

4. In Christianity

On, the contrary, in the West, the Christian thinkers get hold of the term 'person' which has begun to be used in law courts and define it in such a way that it will designate precisely this privileged status. Writes Saint Thomas Aquinas:

Among particular individuals, some have a more perfect existence than others. They are those that are masters of their own activity and act of themselves. Therefore, those singular rational substances receive the special name of *person*. (*Summa Theologiae*, 1, 29, 1) *Person* signifies what is noblest in the whole of nature. (*Ibid.*, 1, 29, 2) Intelligent creatures excel all others in the perfection of their nature and the dignity of their end: they are masters of their activity and act freely. They reach to their destiny by their own proper activity, that is, by knowing and loving God. Rational creatures are governed by him, no doubt, but for their own benefit. Men are principals, not mere instruments. They are not made for anyone's utility. Their actions have a personal value and

are not simply from and for human nature. (*III Summa contra Gentes*, 111 sq.)

From St Thomas onwards, attention is directed increasingly to intellectual consciousness and the various acts of the intellect and will. This had already begun with St. Augustine and is henceforth continued by the Augustinian thinkers.

5. In both Sankara and St. Thomas

In India, the question is: Who am I? And the conviction grows that it cannot be answered in final depth apart from a recourse to the *Śruti* with the help of the Vedānta exegetes. The answer of *Śaṅkara* and in their own way Rāmānuja and Vallabha is that the ground of the self, the supreme Ātman, is the Brahman itself. This tends to decrease the importance and dignity of the finite self. But Madhva vindicates it by exalting the inner witness, the *sākṣin*, which is man's own consciousness.

But there is something more important that we find in *Śaṅkara* as well as in St. Thomas Aquinas: a clear notion of the intellectual dynamism of man and of its range and goal. The desire of knowing, he says, which is innate (*naisargika*) extends up to the Brahman and its goal is an intellectual penetration (*avagati*) into the divine Essence itself.

The direct object of the desire of knowing Brahman (*brahma-jijñāsā*) is a knowledge culminating in an intellectual penetration (*avagati paryantam jñānam*), desires having reference to fruits. Knowledge, indeed, constitutes the means (*pramāṇa*) through which the Brahman is desired to be intellectually penetrated into (*avagatum iṣṭam*). For this penetration of the Brahman is the end of man (*brahmāvagati hi purnṣārthaḥ*) since it extirpates completely that which is bad, namely, nescience etc, which are the seeds of the entire saṃsāra (*Brahma - sūtra bhāṣya*, I.1.1). The knowledge that discerns the Brahman and discards nescience terminates in experience (*anubhava + avasānam*). (*Ibid*, II.1 4) Nothing finite can set the intellect's desire at rest. This is proved by the fact that

the intellect, given any finite thing, strives to go beyond it. Now the excellence and power of any created substance is finite; hence the knowledge of any of them is unable to satisfy our natural desire which tends to grasp that substance which is of an infinite excellence.

Moreover; Just as there is a natural desire for knowledge in all intellectual natures, so there is in men a natural desire to rid themselves of ignorance or nescience.... Now they know that God's essence is above them and above everything that they understand; hence, they know that the divine essence is unknown to them. Therefore their natural desire tends to know the divine essence.

Besides: The nearer a thing is to its end, the greater the desire with which it tends to that end. Now, however much we know that God exists and other things that this includes, we still go on desiring and seeking to know Him in his essence.

Hence, we conclude that man's ultimate happiness does not consist in the knowledge whereby we know God through our own unaided power, but our desire still leads us on to the very essence of God. (*Summa contra Gentiles*, III, 50) If, therefore, the divine essence is to be seen at all, it must be that the intellect sees it through the divine essence itself; *So that in That Vision the Divine Essence is Both the Object and the Medium of Vision.* (*Ibid*, III, 51)

It is obvious that the existence in man of such a dynamism gives him an excellence and a dignity which surpasses all others. The consequences of this are abundantly developed by St. Thomas but there is no need of expatiating here over them.

Because the term "person" does not exist in Sanskrit, it is often thought that India had in the past no awareness of the dignity of the human person. But, in conclusion, we may say that the parallel lines of development sketched out above show that India has known the reality of that dignity in a manner not unlike that of the West.