

Plurality of Religions and Tolerance

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Abstract

The problem of Inter-Religious understanding is a burning issue in our time. Historically speaking, religion works as a cohesive force in society. It is also a cause of conflict and bloodshed. So, the question arises: how 'to live together and let others to live'? It is said that peaceful co-existence of different religions is possible on the basis of logic of alternation. It allows us not only to 'tolerate' but also to 'accept' other religions. This is conducive to peace. In societal level, it becomes disturbed if there is lacking of inter-religious understanding. All religions speak of peace. Today the choice before us is between 'living together' in peace or 'dying together' in conflicts.

Keywords: Religious Tolerance, fanaticism, sectarianism, dogmatism, avatāra, inter-religious understanding, matuarbuddhi, Dharma

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A discourse on 'Religious Tolerance' is unquestionably of perennial relevance, and is all the more so in the present strife-stricken global situation. And India is no exception. Tolerance is no doubt a great altruistic virtue that is required to be fostered, cultivated and practised at every step of our life so as to make up a peaceful, benevolent Society of human beings. Of course, a society without black sheep is impossible, and Tolerance should accordingly have some limits. Such a Society definitely lays down the foundation of our ethics-religious life proper which, in turn, is based on the principle of Universal Love and is obviously opposed to religious fanaticism or dogmatism.

'Religion' as such generally implies a holy relation between the worshipper and the worshipped- a relation which is required to be carefully maintained by way of continuous prayer and adoration by the devotee or by way of rigorous penance by the aspirant. It goes without saying that both the aforesaid paths involve disinterested Intentional Action (Karma) that leads the aspirant to the Unique, Final Goal, i.e., realization of oneself as inseparable from Ultimate Reality, be it God, the absolute or the highest good the most perfect. It is to be noted however that tolerance is normally accompanied by the spirit of self-control and self-sacrifice, by virtue of which one becomes eligible for pursuit of the ultimate. Tolerance in general and 'religious tolerance' in particular, is indeed a great virtue.

When, on the other hand, we speak of the different sects of Religion, such as, Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Mohammedanism, as also of the sub-sects of the each, the tolerance acquires a different meaning. Here 'tolerance' means a virtue that makes possible transformation of misunderstanding into mutual understanding by way of reconciliation of conflicts of opinions that naturally stem from the sectarian temperament.

Religion subjectively practised is religion proper. The sacred message of universal love propagated and actualized by Buddha, Christ, Sri Chaitanyadev, Swami Vivekananda and others of their way of thinking, is certainly of immense value for the human society. But religion, once commercially and politically oriented, tends to become institutional and starts getting infected with such negative values as fanaticism, sectarianism and dogmatism. One is bound by, and is required to rigidly regulate one's activities according to, the institutional rules in order to be a member of an Institution of a particular religious sect. Any violation is a punishable guilt or offence. Thus institutional religion brings forth authoritarianism, fundamentalism, and also communalism. All this takes away human liberty, and indulges in meanness and unsocial activities in the name of religion. Every sectarian is apt to regard his own religious view and the Institution he belongs to, as the best of all; with this he becomes fanatic or communal and naturally tends to come in conflict with men of other sects. Such conflicts, when grows severe, very often culminate in crusades which, as historical phenomena, have been found to take place repeatedly in different parts of our Society right from the remote past to date causing deaths mostly of the innocent. We should not hesitate to say that this is one of the most abominable abuses of the Institutional religion. In such cases methodical practice of Tolerance is a crying need for protecting religion from such undesirable elements, so that the peaceful social environment may be restored to.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsadev, a world-famous sage, practically verified the factuality of one of his numerous celebrated messages: '*Jata mata, tata patha*'- 'as many faiths, so many ways' is directed towards establishing a constructive and respectful attitude towards all. His life and sayings offer a solution by recognising the other religious traditions as reasonable and he conforms that all the different ways of prayer or worships are adequate paths. The most significant impact of Sri Ramakrishna on future generations is neither the introduction of a new path nor to be appeared as an *avatāra*. On the contrary, he transmitted the very meaning of the religious consciousness by being a living example to it by himself. Through his teaching he claimed that religious consciousness cannot be exclusively of one's own tradition. His 'free-frank' teaching has done a tremendous job towards inter-religious understanding. Sri Ramakrishna has again and again emphasised that dogmatism of any kind is wrong. The followers of different religious traditions are free to choose their own paths which suit them the best. To Sri Ramakrishna, 'to think of God as this or that only' is wrong. Those who believe like this are like those of '*matuarbuddhi*' (having dogmatic belief), according to Sri Ramakrishna. He realized that all the various paths prescribed by the religious Institutions of different sects ultimately converge into one, i.e., the path founded on self-control, self-sacrifice, love, deep devotion and rigorous penance that naturally lead to the same ultimate goal. In other words, the essence of the various preachings imparted by different religious institutions is virtually the same with the same end in view, and accordingly the merit of each of them should be duly reckoned with. In short, we should be secular. This is how Sri Ramakrishna made a grand synthesis of all possible views on religion. Obviously, therefore, reverend Sri Ramakrishna is love, tolerance, and, above all, religion embodied; and we can very well point to him and give an ostensive definition of religion as such. Swami Vivekananda, one of the closest disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, candidly declares: To love living beings is to love God. According to Jesus Christ, only the pure in heart shall see God. One, who loves best all things both great and small, also loves the dear God who loves us all.

In his ideas and opinions Albert Einstein, a celebrated prophet in the domain of Science, also speaks for an extensive definition of religion. As a man of science, as he himself admits, he is unable to accept a definition of religion in terms of an abstract entity like God. According to him, the great men's style of life and the deeds done by them can very well constitute an ostensive definition of religion. Einstein mentions the names of Jesus Christ, Buddha and Spinoza, each of whom he regards as religion embodied. To point to such a pious person is to define religion ostensively. Great men are basically broad-minded persons and their activities disinterested, and are as such devoted to promotion of Social welfare. Therefore, all that is desirable says Einstein, is ".....free and responsible

development of the individual, so that he may place his powers freely and gladly in the service of all mankind. There is no room in this for the divinization of a nation, of a class, let alone of an individual.”¹

The world is primarily divisible into two spheres: the sphere of non-living things and that of living beings; the latter is further divisible into plant world, animal world and the world of self-conscious human beings. Needless to say, this division is man-made, and the purpose is epistemological; and each of these sub-divisions is full of diversities and varieties. It is to be noted that the principle of this division is founded on Dharma. For instance, we find concrete material things as solid, semi-liquid (oily or gummy), liquid and gas. Now each of them has its own characteristic features that constitute its 'nature' or 'dharma'. A solid thing has a specific form, be it rectangular, triangular, circular or of some other form, occupying a portion of space of the same form; and it is relatively static, i.e., incapable of moving from one place to another by itself; as a semi-liquid or oily substance, it has no form of its own - it assumes the form of its container- the same is true of the liquid and gas; but while the liquid flows downward, the gas moves upward. Obviously, this classification is founded on 'the nature' or 'dharma' of the things classified. Naturally, the same thing holds good of all other classifications in the non-living, living and the human worlds. Class characters apart, the characteristic features peculiar to every individual member of a class, must also be taken into account. And "Dharma" is comprehensive of all the characteristic features, known or unknown to man, of numerous individuals, as also of the classes constituted by them; and as such it contains or sustains them and also enables them to present themselves in the world as they actually are.

The scope of the present discourse being as it is, the genetic account of the "Dharma" may well be kept aside, and for the sake of brevity let us come straight to the human world that deserves treatment for an inquiry into the "Dharma" of Man. Not that what the Dharma of Man is like, but that what the Dharma of Man should be, is our query; because there are some living beings that are men by appearance though, are not virtually so by nature. We shall do well to refer in this context to the Vaiśeṣika definition of Dharma which is as follows:

"Yatoabhyudaya nisreyasa siddhih Dharma."

That is to say, 'Dharma' is what leads one to the final Goal of life, i.e., Liberation through gradual upliftment; and no other Ideal can be better than this. According to Jaimini Sutra, "Dharma" is Self-sacrifice. In the Manu Samhitā "Dharaa" has been defined as:

"Dhṛti kshama damosteyam souchamindriya nigrahaḥ
Dhirvidyā satyamakrodho daśam dharmalakṣaṇam."²

That is to say, contentment, forgiveness, self-control, non-indulgence in theft, purity, suppression of sensuality, wisdom (sastra jnana), self-realization (atma-jnana) truthfulness, and negation of anger - these ten virtues constitute Dharma.

The above discussion makes it amply clear that one cannot be regarded as a 'real man', until he can acquire the aforesaid virtues that constitute his 'Dharma', and that 'Dharma' as such and true Religion are essentially the same, since Religion qua Religion also comprises all the virtues above mentioned, that the aspirant is required to acquire, cultivate and practise in order to become a perfect man, i.e., perfectly religious. It is indeed a very difficult task to fulfil. One may or may not be a member of some religious Institution for the attainment of Perfection; one may, on the other hand, seek to achieve the Goal by way of personal efforts. The latter is certainly better; because in that case one can keep oneself away from the abuses of Institutional religion. Søren Kierkegaard, the father of the existentialist philosophy, actually realized this; he declined to submit to the authority of the Church, and to be bound by the Church-discipline at the cost of his freedom; instead, he made a sincere effort in and by himself to become a true Christian. To be baptised is not to be a Christian, he preached. Swami Vivekananda said in the same tune: Be

¹ Albert Einstein, *Out of My Later Years: The Scientist, Philosopher, and Man portrayed through His Own Words*, Open Road Media, 2011, p.20

² Manu Samhitā: 6/92

honest, don't pretend to be so. Swami Vivekananda's concluding words in his final address clearly substantiate the pluralistic view of religion: "The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian; but each must assimilate the Spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth."³ These words should ignite the society once again to implement the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. Harmony among religions means expressing empathy, love, concern and togetherness. Love and forgiveness of the past heal the wounds of conflicts and selfishness inflicted by fundamentalism and fanaticism. Love breaks the boundaries of monocultures and opens the doors for multiculturalism. Harmony leads to democracy and fosters tolerance, solidarity, dialogue and acceptance. Above all, it is love that binds the society and the nations and this love-bond is the foundation for inter-religious harmony and peace. We need to adapt new approaches to promote a sustainable culture of harmony and peace suitable for the emerging pluralistic society. After 125 years, the vibrancy of the voice of Swami Vivekananda that filled the Columbus Hall in 1893 is echoed today- "Help and not fight," "Assimilation and not Destruction," "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension."⁴

In fine, we are never ready to see 'Religion' infected with the abuses of the Institutional Religion, fanaticism, authoritarianism, dogmatism and other such dangerous germs, and to see its distorted form which is definitely a pernicious Social Evil. And Tolerance within limits is certainly one of the best cures. So let us say once again: 'Religious Tolerance' is a great value.

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³ Swami Vivekananda , *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* , Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, Vol. 1, 2011, p. 24.

⁴ Ibid.

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