

Mission, Unity and Renewal

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The Context

India is the land of religions and its people have been religious throughout their history of existence as people and nation. Almost all the major and minor religions of the world are very faithfully followed here together with many religions of the tribals. The primeval religiosity of man-kind was very earlier recognised by the sensitive souls of the land and a process of ecumenism long started in the history of religion here which gave rise to what we know as Hinduism, which is both a religion and a culture, i.e. a way of life. The process is not yet completed, as new and different religiosities—such as the Sikh, the Muslim, the Christian, the Zoroastrian—assert their right to retain their distinct identity. The context of Indian situation has always been religious, and its society pluralistic which is now described as religious pluralism.

Being born and brought up in such a country and situation, we hardly need an explanation of the term and concept '*religious pluralism*'. We are living among the people with different tags or name plates—Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Roman Catholic, Jain, Buddhist, Parsi, Sikh and what not. This understanding of our religious situation can be termed as a situation of religious pluralism. There is no doubt that it can be so; but the *Plurality of Religion* is not the situation of religious pluralism. Having a number of religions in a country or society like ours, only makes us aware of the fact of existence of religions and faith other than our own, nothing less or more.

There will not be any problem if such a situation is accepted. You just recognise the existence of number of faiths around you, and let them live peacefully within their own clusters. This is what seems to have been envisaged in the concept of *secularism*, accepted so readily by the makers of our constitution. It was recognised that India is a land of religions, and as such, all religions should be left to themselves. The state should not interfere in anything that has to do with the religions.

It was a noble concept that gave us something to start with. But concepts are concepts—abstract, away from life, intellectual, far removed from the living situation of man and his society.

Moreover, the terms as well as concepts have so many shades of meanings, that it soon became the tool in the hands of interested persons, to be used for their convenience. The word is now so much used, often misused though, that it has lost its meaning and significance, so much so that Bharatiya Janata Party is now talking about 'positive secularism', whatever meaning and significance it may have now.

For our discussion, I would like to limit myself to the challenges that has arisen out of our post-independence situation with special reference to this constitutional concept of 'secularism' and existential situation of 'religious pluralism'. It seems to me that they have failed to provide an adequate theoretical theological answer to the Indian religious situation.

The Challenges :

(a) *Communalism*: No society can live without community feeling— feeling of belongingness and communality. There is nothing wrong with this kind of feeling; but now there seems to be something wrong with such a noble feeling of togetherness and oneness. Incidents in Moradabad, Aligarh, Kanya Kumari, Meerut, Ahmedabad, Bhagalpur, and recently in Kanpur, are enough to remind us the wrong notion that has been taken up by this word. It has become an unacceptable term. Hardly a day passes without a report of some conflict between communal and religious groups. It is amazing how man, in the name of religion, can be so cruel to his fellow-men.

There are now Hindu communalism, Christian communalism, Muslim communalism, tribal communalism, to name a few, that are keeping communalism alive in their respective situations. It has local, national, as well as international dimensions. No religion— minor or major— can be said to be free from all pervasive power of communalism.

There may be some valid causes for the eruption of communal outbursts. The struggle for *identity* may be one. The emergence of national consciousness (*nationalism*) is a powerful ideology that brought people together against a common enemy, the colonial power. But once the goal is attained, a part of it changed itself into the self-consciousness of separate groups and communities. Positively speaking this kind of self-consciousness can be a source of genuine movement for self-hood and mature growth of persons in a community. Many a linguistic, cultural and religious self-consciousness has been helpful in the organization of states in India. Negatively speaking, this may be

a source of endless conflicts, when each group tries to absolutize its past identity. The memories of the past domination or exploitation of one group by the other and the conflicts between them surface with a new force, giving rise to group tension and disharmony. What has been happening in Punjab, Assam, Bihar, Goa, Darjeeling has some seeds in this kind of self-consciousness.

What is often hidden in the communal clash is the *economic* factor. It can hardly be denied that we use religion or communal groupings as the focal point for organized fight for our share. The fight becomes scarce as one group finds itself alienated from the mainstream or losing the game. The Bhagalpur riots are a good example of such fight, where the worst sufferers were the powerloom owners and workers, who belonged to a minority community. At Aligarh, they were the artisans ; in Kanyakumari, they were the Christians.

The *political* factor has so many glaring examples that it can hardly be ignored. The invisible political hand has always been recognised behind all the post-independence-communal riots.

One cannot overlook the *organised activities* of some groups, like RSS, Muslim league, JKLF, Bajarang Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, etc. in generating intense communal hatred and violence. Their ideology, para-military training and negative/hostile propaganda add fuel to already volatile situation.

The elite use the poor for their own benefit. They whip up the communal feelings in order that they may continue their dominance. The *class solidarity* that cuts across the boundaries of religion and caste has not emerged to any significant degree among the weaker sections. It is difficult to say that the habit of thinking along caste lines has disappeared. The poor brahmin still thinks that scheduled caste people are his greatest enemy. The government policy of reservation has not helped ; instead it has further perpetuated the caste feelings and helped the caste solidarity. It has given political colouring to communalism.

(b) Resurgent Religiosity: One of the distinctive characteristics of religion in the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the advent of all kinds of resurgent movements that sprang up to suit the aspirations of the adherents of major/minor religions. The main catalyst for such a resurgent religiosity was provided by the introduction of western education, activities of the missionaries, work of orientalist, establishment of "United" India under the British crown and many others as well. They gave rise to movements such as Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Theosophical Society; the movements which were interested to

reform their religion and society from within. There were also the personalities, such as Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Vivekananda, Sir Sayad Ahmed Khan, Gandhi, Annie Beasant, who did their bit in the reforming process within the society at large. And then, there came a host of charismatic leaders, known as Gurus, Swamis, Acharyas, who gave a new dimension to their religion. Apart from these, a new religious ideology as the basis of Indian nation began to take shape that gave birth to many political groups and parties, one of which was successful in carving a nation of their own.

The resurgent religiosity has made the adherents of religions more *conservative* and *orthodox*. The revival of the practice of Sati, old cultic practices, going back to Shariat, demands for personal laws, emphasis on purity— are some of its recent manifestations. The popularity of serials on Ramayana and Mahabharata on television provides an indication of the mood of the masses. The emotional appeal the birth-place of Rama had on public mind, has started all beyond their expectations. It has given rise to a kind of *religious* terrorism that was unheard of before. The use of places of worship to store arms, control of religious-centres by militants, forcing to obey religious obligations by law—are something that concern every sensitive soul.

The gurus have given a call to free religion from its age-old bondage of dogma and rituals and have provided a new insight into a freer world-order and community. The success of Acharya Rajneesh, Nirankari, Satsangha, Mahesh Yogi, Krishna Murty foundation, Arvinda Ashram, Acharya Tulsi points out that the people are sick of old ideas, old order and old values. They are looking for new experiments that will give them religious and spiritual satisfaction.

(c) Religion and politics: Much of the recent problems related to the religious life of an ordinary citizen, have sprung out of politicians' understanding of the word and concept, secular. It has earlier been mentioned that secularism has become a notion which means non-interference of the state in anything that has something to do with religion. It is hard to say that the State has been fair, all the times, to this understanding. Otherwise, how can we explain the acceptance of so many personal laws in India—Hindu, Christian, Muslims? How can we explain the state's anxiety to override the laws of the nation and rulings of the highest court of the land?

In the new Indian context, it seems to me, the relation between religion and politics has to be seen from two points of view : Politics

of religion and religion of politics. Looking from the first point of view, politics has become the hand maid of religion. In our situation, Punjab is the best example. The recent election also showed how best religion can be used for the success of an individual or a party. Another point of view emphasises the fact of religion being hand maid of politics. The controversy of Babri-Ram-Janma-bhumi is enough to illustrate the point.

Religion has played an active part in the renewal of political systems in the Philippines, Iran, Israel, South Africa and South American countries. It is the basis of political systems in many Muslim countries and has played a major part in instructing the systems in communist dominated world of Europe. The power of religion in renewal and unity is far more evident now than earlier.

In the Indian context, the talk of Rama-rajya in the last election by the major political parties to woo the electorates, victories of candidates with religious commitments, support of religious leaders and institutions to one or other political parties has clearly demonstrated the power religion has over the masses, and its success in uniting the people for a cause. The talk of Hindutva (Hinduness) rather than Indian-ness, has sent a shock-wave to the adherents of minor religions, who have begun to unite under different sheds.

The Christian Answer :

For a multi-religious country like ours, where the destinies of different religious communities are inter-twined and where people of different religious persuasions and ideological convictions face the same human problems in the life of the nation, we need to remove suspicion and build up confidence and trust between people. The churches have learned through their experiences that dialogues can be an answer to challenges thrown by the situation of religious pluralism and secularism. It can also become an experience of Christian neighbourliness and part of the Christian ministry in a pluralist world.

In the world of discussions, summits, seminars, workshops, working-group meetings of delegates, it is good to remind ourselves that dialogue is not meant to be a matter of discussion, it is a matter of relationships. It has to do more with the people than with ideas. It is therefore, a spirit, a mood, an attitude towards neighbours of other faiths. The way it has been presented in recent past through seminars, theological discussions and in publications, it has been misunderstood as a means, a method, a technique

to communicate the message and to prove the inadequacies of other faiths and the finality of one's own faith. Though this is an unfortunate development and has caused a set-back to the process of dialogue, which was filtering through the upper levels to the grass-root level, it is heartening to note that masses are beginning to appreciate, and participate in the process. We who have been living among neighbours of other faiths since time immemorial, are aware that theological statements arising out of situations where there are no people of other faiths, no scriptures other than the Bible, and no culture other than the Western, can hardly provide a norm for our multi-religious society. We have to work out the norms for ourselves, and we have been able to make progress in our efforts. We need to proceed in the spirit, expressed in the WCC's guidelines on Dialogue (1979), in assuring neighbours through our words, acts and deeds! "We feel able with integrity to assure our partners in dialogue that we come not as manipulators, but as fellow pilgrims to speak with them of what we believe God to have done in Jesus Christ who has gone before us, but whom we seek to meet anew in dialogue". Dr. S.J. Samartha, one of the foremost supporters of dialogue, proposes three-fold purpose of dialogue for Indian situation :

- (i) to remove ignorance and misconceptions of each other's belief and practices and to promote better understanding between partners of different faiths ;
- (ii) to cooperate for common purpose in society particularly where human rights, social and economic justice and peace in the community are concerned, and
- (iii) to bring to bear the deeper resources of religions on basic problems of human existence that arise because of human finiteness which makes the question of transcendence strikingly relevant in an increasing technological society.

He has a point to make ; it is suicidal if we do not recognize the providence of God for our people who have been thoroughly religious through all these years of existence as a nation and strangle our own spiritual growth.

Programme for Unity and Renewal

Indians may claim themselves to be the chosen ones of God, and take pride in the fact that their society has been a multi-religious society for a longer period in history than any other country in the world. It is amazing to some, though frustrating for others, that religion still has strong hold on the life of its people in spite of modernization, secularization, growth of science, and

technological innovations. Islam or Christianity or Marxism has not been able to conquer the religions of India. They have to come to terms with the persistent pluralism of Indian religious traditions and spirituality. Conscious efforts have to be made to make the people realize this truth.

Minoritism, more so the minority-complex, has to be dealt with in a more positive way, highlighting the contribution of particular minority religion groups. It is difficult to bring communities together with diverse religious outlook, more so, if they have grown in isolation from each other. Suspicions have to overcome; trust and confidence have to build up.

There are areas in which Christian groups/ individuals/ institutions and neighbours of other faiths are working together. Church/institutions can take initiative to recognise them and focus theological reflection on their experience. This will provide every one an opportunity for self renewal.

Formation of inter-religious group can be another area of activity that can be taken up. They may discuss both practical matters in society and deeper issues of faith. There are profound human issues which people of all faith have to consider today: the meaning of transcendence in a technological society; the question of peace in a world threatened by nuclear war; the ecology and environmental issues.

Sharing of one's religious insights is something that needs to be encouraged. Participation in prayers, ceremonies and festivals of neighbours may provide an opportunity for a deeper understanding of one's religious inheritance. It is a pity that we enjoy holidays on the festival days of our neighbours but miss the opportunity to share their joys and to enhance our own spirituality. Some forum needs to be formed where educative information can be exchanged between adherents of different religions.

Something should be done to provide informal understanding of religions to the citizens of this land. Introduction to courses can be incorporated in the present syllabi at school level, whereas study of religions as academic and intellectual discipline be made available at degree level. Serampore has introduced a diploma course in Christian studies through external studies to all seekers without distinction of religious affiliation. It should now take lead in providing informal understanding of other religions from their faith perspective similar to its diploma course. This kind of pioneering effort will sure create a better world of mutual understanding and appreciation of each other's faith, bringing peace and harmony in the society and enriching, at the same time,

our own spirituality.

It is encouraging to see that there are some positive response from leaders of other faiths : Swami Agnivesh taking up the cause of the bonded labourers ; Bahuguna of ecology, Menaka Gandhi of animals ; Acharya Tulsi and Dalai Lama of peace and harmony in the community. There is some new life injected into the working of minority commission and National Integration Council. The road to renewal and unity is now clearly visible. Let us march along with the people of other faiths to make this world truly a world of peace, harmony and brotherhood.