

The Universal Ethos of Religion

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Religion, no less than science, has been criticised by a number of intellectuals and pacifists like Bertrand Russel and E.M. Forster, and one cannot help being convinced with their logic. More blood, they say has been shed in the name of religion- than in the name of pure politics. Even today zealots of religion are active; post war power blocks have been replaced by a new equation along the religious and ethnic lines. The twenty first century seems to launch a society cleft with the splinter of fundamentalism. At the same time, there is no denying the fact the people are reacting against fundamentalism, and a kind of liberal feeling of tolerance is emerging in the educated youth. However, reaction against fundamentalism which sometimes assumes the form of cynicism is not less hazardous than fundamentalism itself. Now the question that troubles us all the time is "is religion altogether harmful for mankind?" Before grappling with the problem we must be very exact as to what religion is. Apart from the faith or creed developed by some conspicuous men in history, religion has been, defined as man's expression of his acknowledgement of the meaning of dharma. Novertheless, many an Indian thinker hesitates to use 'dharma' for religion as the former is claimed to have a wider range that encompasses ethics, moral obligations, physical properties of elements, nature and even instinctive behaviour of beasts as well as human beings. Although such a wide compass may be somewhat irrelevant to the context of our present questio, we may intermittantly use the logical force available in the plethora of Indian philosophy regarding dharma.

Basically every religion if it refers to moral values propounded by spiritual heroes, is immensely beneficial to humanity. But these religions in order to maintain their individual importance and dominance started clashing with one another. Despite their common beliefs and values they could never come on a single platform. Traffic of knowledge and values in the world of religions is as desirable and effective as it is in the field of science. A scientific truth gets strenthened when it is corroborated by researches in other countries. As there is nothing alien or foreign in science, there should not be any sectaiianism in the field of religion either. Undoubtedly there have been a number of social reformers whose honest endeavour has brought a viable synthesis of all religions. Common observations and parallel experiences of all religions, if incorporated into one corpus may raise religion to the status of honour which has been injoyed by science and democracy. If religion claims to profess truth, it will have to prove its

universal applicability as well as homoniety with all other faiths. The moment a religious community condemns the beliefs and customs of other communities it ceases to be true and universal. Moreover the beliefs are never subject to laboratory examination and acit tests. Beliefs are beliefs. They are to be taken for granted. Beliefs cannot be universal. What can be regarded as universally true in every religion is its ethics which the moral sense of every human being accepts. If all religions preach, love, mercy and forgiveness, why shouldn't they shake hands with one another ? It is the common values of all religions that may transform this world into the kingdom of God or Vaikuntha. It is, therefore, hightime that we fished out some universal values from Hinduism which are homogeneous to all other important religions. Similar efforts should be made with regard to other religions. Those who are well versed in the scriptures of their respective religions, may come out with common strands which may be joined to make a canopy of the world.

The Gita recognises all religions as genuine paths of devotion. There are a few Sanskrit verses that tend to confuse us such as :-

Swadharmae nidhanam sreyah paradharmo dhayavaha

and

Sarva dhariiuiu partiyajya mamekam saranam vraja

In these verses dharma does not imply what we generally mean by 'religion'. Here dharma means duties and obligations. If we interpret dharma as 'religion', It will go against the basic theme of the Gita. The Gita aims at simplify the idea of religion. Krisna says –

Mam vartmanuvartantc manusyah Partha sarvasah

(All human beings follow my path in every way.)

And the second explanation is clearer than this-

Ye yatha mam parpadyante tanstathaiva bhajamyahma

(In whichever form people worship Me, I present Myself to them in' the same form.)

Although the Gita is older than either Christianity or Islam, it visualizes the polymorphic character of religion and as such presents as anticipatory synthesis. India has been a land of free and fearless thinking abjinitio. Bhagvat Dharma, as a matter of fact is culture that evolved itself in a number of millenia within the limits of a perfect geographical unit assuming colossal shape of religion but without any political or social coercion. Although there are a lot of historical events in Indian

history that exemplify differences of opinion, philosophical conflict, and condemnation of atheism but such conflicts remained confined to literature and soon met with reconciliation and synthesis in succeeding generations. The compromising temper of Bhagavat dharma which was homogenous to all types of the then existing ideologies, it still all embracing and hence quite relevant to the modern situation. It have churned out three pairs of values from Bhagvata dharma viz., forgiveness and pity, truth and honesty, devotion and observance of duties. I think these basic values not only constitute the religion of Indian origin but also many of the major religions of the world. These, I believe, constitute the basic ethos of religion in the broadest sense of the term. Let us discuss them one by one.

1. Forgiveness and Pity : Every religion of the world would agree to the single point definition of dharma given in the Mahabharata-

Sruvatam dharmasarvaswam, srutwacapyavadharyatam
Atmanah pratikulani paresam na samacaret.

(Listen to the essence of religion and having listened try to follow it whatever you dislike don't cause to others)

Something similar can be found in almost all religions, Buddhism and Christianity are eloquent enough in propagating the subjective ethics that checks our inflicting pain on others. In the Bhargavatam Draupadi forgives Aswatthama only because she does not want to deprive a mother of her son, despite the fact that Aswatthama has killed her five sons. Love and pity are the expansions of the 'self'. We cannot love or pity a person unless we expand our ego so as to appreciate his feelings as our own. This putting the self across is the basic thing in all religions.

One who expands one's ego to encompass all creatures, will never be hostile to anybody, rather one would like to remove his sorrow even at the cost of one's own comforts - . t

Na twaham kamaye rajyam na swargam na punarbhavam
kamaye duhdkataptanam pranismanartinasanam.

(I desire neither for crown nor for heaven nor even for salvation; the only desire I cherish is the eradication of sorrows of suffering creatures).

There may not be subjective earnestness in this verse, which we find in the character of King Rantideva who wants to suffer all pains of the suffering people himself.

Na Kainuycham gatimiswarat param
Astarthiyuktampunarbharn va
Artiirt prapadyeakhildehabhajam Antasthito yen bhavantyaduhkhah
(Bhagavatam 9.20.12)

(I am desirous neither of great eminence nor of prosperity nor of salvation. By entering their hearts I would rather undergo the suffering of all embodied souls so that they may be relieved of all miseries).

Here we are simply reminded of Christ's image. Jesus Christ suffered for the suffering humanity. He had the capacity to appreciate the miseries of others. Doesn't he preach a value similar to the one propagated by Rantideva ? Here is the true spirit of Ahimsa. We can save ourselves from violence only by abstaining from it. When we cause pain to others we initiate a chain reaction which continues infinitely, and ultimately it bomerangs upon us. Similarly non-violence also spreads like chain reaction and creates a fearless and affectionate atmosphere in society. We should not wait for others to start. We can practise non-violence now and here. If you are selfish, the greatest selfishness lies in non-violence, because like violence, non-violence is reflective. It will make you fearless. The moment you practise non-violence the atmosphere around you becomes charged with love, affection and peace. Whosoever comes in the range, of your influence will cast off all hostility and hatred. Patanjali, the great exponent of yoga system, says

Ahimsa pratisthayam tat sannidhau vairyaga

(In an environment charged with ahimsa, creatures give up all animosity.)

Ahimsa has two phases — one is active and the other is passive. Active ahimsa is pity. It forces us to help the needy, the down trodden and the miserables. Forgiveness is passive ahimsa; it checks our aggressiveness and revengeful attitude. In each case we will have to enter into the spirit of others.

2. Truth and Honesty : Truth has been given the greatest importance in almost all religions. Moreover truth is one of the most elusive words : We cannot easily define it. The Bhagavatam considers truth the synonym of God. However if we confine ourselves to the practical aspect of truth, it would be easier to understand it. In ur practical life we observe two types of truth the truth of word and the truth of action. The truth of word means we should not conceal, when being asked, any fact of which we have knowledge. The truth of action demands conformity of our actions to what we speak; there should be a similarity between our action, and speech, Now the impediments that come in the path of truth are two fear and desire. We deal in lies when we are afraid of loss or harm. Besides, our desires also tempt us to resort to lies. In either case we are so accustomed to telling lies that we forget that these lies, instead of removing our fears, increase them excessively; they do not fulfil our desires either. A healthy mind is one who speaks truth

spontaneously. The Bhagavatam tells us one cannot be free from fear and desires unless he reposes his full trust in God. A devotee of God always speaks the truth, and occasionally when he tells a lie unconsciously, God converts it into a fact. Brahma says to Narda

Na Bharati meang mrsopalaksyate
maya yadaukathyadhratavto Harih

(My tongue never utters a lie as I always bear the memory of God in my heart)

Closely associated with truth is honesty. According to Bhagvat dharma honesty According to Bhagvay dharma honesty is a means of confining one's desire to the bare needs, and when he trespasses this limit he becomes dishonest. We are told in the Bhagvatam-

Yavad bhriyet jatharma tavtswatwam he dehinam
Adhikam yoabhimanyet sah stenah Uandamarhati.

(People should calim only that much which may satisfy their basic needs. If person possesses more than needs, lie is a thief and as such, deserves punishment.)

This principle may be acceptable to the communists also. Moreover, here lies the true spirit of Indian communism. Before the situation of punishment arises. One should mend oneself. Moreover, we should inculcate social awareness. The only difference between Bhagvat type of communism and the communism propounded by Marx is that the former is strengthened by spirituality Perhaps the /Christian socialist Movement of the Nineteenth Century resembles very much this principle of the Bhavatam. Some of the main exponents of Christian Socialist Movement were Charles Kingsley, Carlyle and Elizabeth Gaskell. these writers propounded the theory of steward-ship in the field of industrialism and social economy. It was because of the efforts of these Christian Socialists that the prospects of a bloody revolution were curbed to peaceful change in society. Communism is a good thing but wedded with spirituality be comes better and more viable. Here is the combination of socialism and spirituality.

Isavasyamidam sarvam yatkinca jagatyam jagat,
Tena tyaktena bhunjitha ma gradhah dasyaswid dhanam.

(Eveiy thing and every place of this world is the abode of God. therefore consume only what is barely needed and leave the rest for others. Never deprive others of

their share) You cannot find a better definition of social justice and this value of honesty is invariably found in all the religions of the world.

3. Devotion and Action : The Bhagvatam believes that it is the ultimate duty of man to dictate himself fully to God's will. Devotion to God is spontaneous. Every creature loves God consciously or unconsciously. According to the Bhagvat philosophy God is Ananda and Ananda is the object of every creature's desire. All life is running after Ananda. It is a different question that our search for Ananda turns to the wrong direction when we take worldly pleasure for it. Physical pleasures may be compared with an itch which may give a pleasant sensation in the beginning but always leaves a burning sensation in the end. Therefore the sooner we realize the true form of God, the better. Devotion to God may be personal but its effect is beneficial for the whole society. A true devotee of God loves everybody. He is hostile to none. He sees the image of his lord in every person and therefore never hates him. Devotion gives him infinite love expansion of his Lord. A true devotee of God can never be fanatic: his love for God teaches him tolerance —

Sarvabhuteshu yah pasyed bhagvadhavamatmantah,
Bhutani bhagvatyatmanyesa bhagavatottamah.

(The best devotee of God is one who sees God and himself in all persons, and similarly all persons in God and himself)

Devotion to God does not make us lethargic; rather it increases our efficiency. God himself preaches the dignity of labour. Krishna advises the people of Vraja to stop sacrifices offered to Indra. He asks them to work for agriculture and removes their fear of natural calamities. The feeling of the Govardhan mountain is symbolic of action. In a strictly physical sense one may discern Krishna's quality of leadership in construction a bandh to check floods from the sraswati river existent in those days. Even today the Govardhan looks more like a broad wall than a mountain. To conclude, the Bhagvat dharma which may be regarded as the presentative of all ancient Indian religions is homogeneous to the major religions of the world. The principle values of Bhagvat dharma like forgiveness and pity, truth and honesty, devotion and action are universally acknowledged canons of theology and ethics. these values not only teach us personal morality but also raise us to the comopolitan level of tolerance and generosity.