



Religion in enhancing the integration of humankind: A civilizational approach

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Abstract

In the present era, human society claiming to be a 'civilized society' is engulfed with greed and conflict. Scientific advancement and technology, artificial intelligence, etc. has no doubt occupied a central position in the life of the citizens. It seems to be the fact that intellectual, material, and scientific achievement has become an integral determining factor/parameter in comprehending human society and civilisation. At various instances the humans have seldom ignored true understanding of civilization and significance of religion in the human life that which distinguish them from non-humans. Thus, earnest attempt has been made to show the significance of religion in the human life (Indian as well as Western context) respectively in uniting/binding the people of this globe in togetherness so as to establish the kingdom of peace and harmony.

Key words: Religion, Civilization, Religious pluralism, & Peace, etc.

Religion is that pervasive feature of life which binds humankind spiritually. Throughout the ages it has occupied a central place in the continuing history of mankind. Religion does also separate man from the animal world. "Religion is one of the things which distinguish man from the other animals. Apes and dolphins, as far as we know, have no religions, but no group of human beings has ever been discovered which do not have religious beliefs."¹ It certainly follows from this that religion stands as one of the distinctive marks of man separating from animals. Religion also teaches humans self-reliance, self-control and gives solace to suffering. One may not be wrong in asserting religion as one of the essential element of civilization as far as true understanding of religion leads to the unity of humankind on the globe. To

elaborate it, religion has a significant role in shaping many political, economic and domestic institutions. Further, religion does also assist an individual in the realization of inherent quality of everything.

The Latin term '*religio*'² which was the basis of the derivation of the English term 'religion' has been variously interpreted by different thinkers. Such as, Servius interpret religion as 'to bind'. In this sense religion binds people together in common practices and beliefs; common enterprise of life. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the term religion 'as human recognition of a superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship (Latin *religio* bond)'.³ It simply implies that religion is a matter of belief and worship towards the supernatural power or Infinite Being. Religion has also been interpreted by a number of thinkers in different manners. Such as, to the anthropologists religion helps to unite people in a shared experience and explanations of life providing a pattern of human behaviour in response to the hazards of life. Sociologists conceive religion as providing an agreed way of looking at the world. It gives the individual a sense of purpose and meaning. But, to be realistic, interpretation of religion is a challenging task owing to the case that there are several interpretations of religion which do not seems to hold the same line of agreement.

There are numbers of religions all over the world (monotheistic as well as polytheistic forms of religions) ranging from pre-historic to historic periods. This paper primarily dwell upon the renowned contemporary Indian thinkers and in consonance to this it is necessary to spell out the very well known fact that India is a multi-racial, multi-linguistic, multi-cultural and most importantly multi-religious country. This is to say



that the religious plurality in the state is an undeniable fact and amidst the existence of multi-religions in the state history does also witness that if not often at least some time disputes arises on the basis of religion. As we inhabit in the so called civilized world disputes and prejudices on the basis of religion may not be considered as praiseworthy. Any sort of religious disputes, discriminations and violence is a law of the brute, but not of humankind. It is true that existence of some doctrinal similarities as well as dissimilarities exists among different religions, but it may not be necessary that it should stand as a barrier towards the progress in human society.

In consonance to this, I would like to throw some light upon the two opposite attitudes which people of one religion may have towards the other. First of all, some people hold on the viewpoint that 'Religions are like the colours in a rainbow: they are all parts of one light'. They look more at the ways in which religions come close to each other, than at the ways in which they differ implying that there is a unity between them beneath the differences. Secondly, some other people emphasize more importance at the differences between religions than at the ways in which they come close to each other. To them, 'Religions are like the separate colours of a rainbow. Only one is the true colour'. It simply meant that only one of the religions can be true religion. There lies a difficulty that these two attitudes do not fit in with each other.

India being a multi-racial, multi-linguistic, multi-religious and multi-cultural state, plurality of religion constitutes one of the most important features. In respect to the emergence of pluralistic thought Wilfred Cantwell Smith and John Hick, the two leading pluralistic thinkers are worth considering. Smith stands as an example paving the way for greater pluralistic thought by means of cooperative interaction in diverse religious traditions. In his words, 'it is an urgent task for us to work out a world theology or a theology of comparative religion'.⁴ According to him, such a theology would involve discourse about the transcendent dimension of human life and of the universe, to which the history of religion bears witness and which it elucidates.

To M. K. Gandhi, religion enables to purify an individual's character. It also leads us to realize the existence of the element of essential goodness in every man. Above all, to him, there is no religion higher than truth and righteousness. Religion consists of conscious and sincere love and striving for truth. This is to say that the essence of religion

is the morality. Thereby, true religion and morality are inseparable from each other. He was convinced that all religions lead to God and declared in his own words, "Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as we reach the same goal? In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals".⁵ Religion is a way of life and a matter of personal concern of the individual. Everyone is free to choose his own religion. One's attitudes towards different religions must be one of tolerance and respect. Mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of the different religions is the need of the hour.

I have also put an effort to highlight some aspects of intra and inter-religious dialogue which is of immense significance to bring people together in the realm of unity. Many religious thinkers are of the opinion that tolerance is one of the most essential elements that will bind humankind together. Thus, this paper aims at enhancing the integration of humankind particularly in Indian context from the civilizational perspective. In the present era, proper comprehension of the essence of religion and its function demands greater importance in order to hold people in a family of oneness rather than the recognition of doctrinal differences among different religions. In doing so integration of human kind as well as society and peace shall prevail in the state and that shall also be our great contribution to global society.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan opines that the cooperation among all the different religions of the world would unite the world and enhance appreciation of other faiths and fruitful interchange among them. In his own words, 'the different religious traditions clothes the one Reality in various images and their visions could embrace and fertilise each other so as to give mankind a many-sided perfection, the spiritual radiance of Hinduism, the faithful obedience of Judaism, the life of beauty of Greek Paganism, the noble compassion of Buddhism, the vision of divine love of Christianity, and the spirit of resignation to the sovereign lord of Islam'.⁶ He emphasizes less the fact of one religion and dwells more on the spirit of loyalty to all religions. He also recommends the spirit of fellowship in the place of their amalgam, fusion or their sublimation. All religions ultimately teach one and the same thing. All religions are merely various paths towards one and the same goal, i.e., God.

At this point, Swami Vivekananda's farewell speech delivered in the Chicago parliament of Religion on 27th September, 1893 is noteworthy.



He declared that religion was/is not the property of one Nation or Tribe and in all religions were born the high talented people. Besides, he had appealed to each and every man not to dream of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others. To him, the very thought of religion was associated with the mode of life based on mutual respect, equality and peaceful co-operation of all men. He believed in the divinity in man and essential oneness of all religions disapproving any sort of narrowness in religious matter. There is no single path of worshipping God, rather existence of different paths are undeniable fact. Therefore, all religions of the world are true leading to God or Ultimate Reality.

To conclude, it is worthy to be remembered that every man is born within a particular cultural tradition and breathing the air of its belief system. All the religions claim uniqueness which marks it off from other religions. But one ought to bear in mind that such uniqueness should not narrow our outlook. Rather, religion should have a common bond which leads to a strong unity of purpose and promotion of all religions would achieve greater social cohesion and national integration. It does well to all by overcoming the discards within us as well as of those outside us. If not all at least some would agree that religion provides humans the essential requirements to humanity.

Notes and References:

- [1]. Cavendish, R.; The Great Religions, Arco publishing inc., New York, 1980, p. 2.
- [2]. The derivation of the word 'religion' suggests several possible readings, as Herbert Stroup reveals: The English word "religion" derives from the Latin "religio". Even so, there is no clear agreement as to the meaning of the word. Servius and others, for example, held that it came from the root "lig-", which means "to bind". Religion in this sense would signify a relationship – the binding relationship between man and God. It draws attention to one of the most obvious and important features of religion. It binds people together in common practices and beliefs; common enterprise of life. Yet, Cicero believed that the word was derived from the root "leg-", which means "to take up, gather, count, or observe". The meaning here suggests the observation of the sign of divine communication. In later times, both meanings were accepted by Augustine, for example, and today there seems to be little if any question regarding the propriety of

either derivation. (Quoted in Stroup, H., Four Religions of Asia, New York, Harper & Row, 1986, p. 6 from McDowell, J. & Stewart, D., Concise guide to today's religions, Scripture press, England, 1990, p. 12.)

- [3]. Thompson, D.; (ed.) The Pocket Oxford Dictionary, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, p. 765.
- [4]. Craig, E.; Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, London & New York, Vol. 8, p. 261.
- [5]. Kumarappa, B.; (ed.) My Religion – M. K. Gandhi, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1995, p. 18.
- [6]. Masih, Y.; A Comparative Study of Religions, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 2005, p. 353.
- [7]. *** This paper is the revised version of the paper presented in the 88th session, Indian Philosophical Congress (IPC), held at Madurai, during 27th – 30th Dec. 2013.