

Human Potential Movements

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People have always been preoccupied with discovering and developing the human potential - the self. It is not something that we have discovered in the twentieth century along with pop psychology and the feel-good school of thought. Be what you can be is not just a newly discovered slogan of the New Age of Aquarius.

Self-development is the goal of education. However, societies and governments are often content to keep their flock at a certain acceptable level of civilized behavior and obedience. Thus, perhaps by default, self-development has generally been left to the purveyors and Gurus of religions or psychology. But religions seek their objective via a source bigger and brighter than the puny human; psychology perhaps feels little need to look beyond the human into human connectivity that religions term divine.

Though the chief aim of religion remains self-awareness and development of human potential, many of the old-time religions have focussed largely on a code to regulate human behavior; this makes religions little different from secular society. Classical Hinduism, for instance, by its strictly codified caste system primarily served to regulate human behavior. If, as Hinduism does, one rigidly stratifies its followers on a system that allows little mobility or flexibility, and even relegates a large percentage of people into a class outside its society as outcastes, the system cannot possibly remain an instrument of human development or progress. It does become peerless in regulating human behavior and promoting docility. I don't mean to pick on Hinduism; such is the history of most religions. In Sikhism, too, like in most religions general religious practices for most people revolve around observance of rituals and behaviors that are ostensibly sanctified and approved by tradition with little thought to their meaning, or self-awareness and self-development. **This remains true even though the thrust of Sikhism has been to exhort humans to discover the divinity within them; this would be the ultimate in human potential.**

Nevertheless, as far as I can see, historically there have been two large-scale movements with their goals clearly and singularly focused on discovery, recognition and development of human potential. Both movements exist and flourish but one has constructed a most powerful and durable society around this idea.

We are all familiar with the words of Emma Lazarus inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor ..." They capture the spirit, though not always the reality, of America. It is from such immigrants, often rejected by their own countries, that the United States takes its vitality and vibrancy. It is to such people that we owe this society that speaks of the inalienable rights of people. The path has not always been smooth, the progress often non-linear but the nation speaks of individual dignity and the opportunity to develop as best as one's talents and inclinations allow. This is a concept as foreign and threatening to most traditional societies as the idea of a space travel to the cave man. There have been uncomfortable detours along the way but the focus has remained unaltered.

I speak not as an unquestioning admirer of all things American. I realize that the application of its principles has often been flawed - look at the treatment of minorities, of Native Americans and women, slavery. Racism has never been far from the surface in American society and government. But it is the idea of human potential and dignity that is important here.

Equally, if not more, alien to the existing traditional society of India, three to five hundred

years ago, was the idea of men and women becoming free from the unceasing control of the Hindu Brahmin hierarchy and unshackled from the chains of the caste system or rid of the tyranny or religious taxation and forcible conversions by the Muslims. India needed a human potential movement and Sikhism provided it. **To speak of freedom of religion in Indian society 500 years ago was unheard of. Three hundred years ago to assert that outcastes were just as good as the upper caste Brahmins or that women should have equal opportunities and rights was revolutionary, even threatening. This is exactly what Sikhism did.**

Both societies - Sikhism and the American dream share the fundamental ideas that men and women have an inherent dignity and that freedom of thought and expression as also from want or fear are God-given rights that no state can take away. There are not gifts to be bestowed by a generous or beneficent ruler on a people though they are integral human qualities that are often seized or denied by tyrants. And humans to be humans must continue to protest such despotic actions by despotic governments. Sikhism, too, in its march through history shows amazing nobility of ideas and often a corresponding and matching failure in practice. As an example, just look at the state of our institutions at this time, or the place of women in Sikh practice. But the idea and ideology remain all important that we must hold on to.

The United States will remain strong and admired only as long as it remembers the ideas that give it life. Sikhism will thrive and flourish as long as Sikh remember their place and potential as a movement for human development. The roots that give life to this movement lie in the teachings of their Gurus and their history.

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