

Social Conflict and the Role of Religion

PROF. DHARAM SINGH*

** (Retd.) Head of Encyclopedia of Sikhism Dept., Punjabi University. Patiala. Email:sikhencypbi@yahoo.com*

THE WORLD WITH ALL THE scientific and technological advancement today finds itself in a position with two-way implications. On one hand, there is talk of globalization which has transformed this big wide world into a global village and the entire humankind into a global community. No part of the world is now closed within itself. People belonging to different religions and cultures, races and ethnicities in a way live as next door neighbours. These different faith-communities are so placed as to live together and interact with one another on daily basis. They can neither afford to live in isolation of nor clash with one another.

On the other hand, globalization has also made each individual lose contact with the other and each faith-community to look at the other with distrust and treat its members as aliens. Individually, one begins his day having 'monologue' with the newspaper and ends the day with the 'idiot box': dialogue even within the family is losing ground. At the community level also, instead of collaboration and co-operation, people of different faith-communities prefer to retain the wall of distrust dividing them. Instead of loving one another, they find themselves at war, either against one another or within themselves, looking with coloured glasses at the violation of human rights and denial of fundamental freedom in the process.

Conflict:

There have been several factors responsible for this absence of peace and harmony in human mind as well as in social relations - economic, political, social and religious. Since the main concern of this gathering is about the role religion, the scope of this paper is also limited to the religious factor alone. However, religion needs to take care of the human life as a whole, including its spiritual as well as mundane aspects. It aims at humanity's spiritual growth with a view to enable it to realize God/Truth which also denotes a state of equipoise (*saha*). At the same time, it also works for creating social conditions conducive for spiritual growth of all – high and low, rich and poor, Hindu and Muslim. Since individuals and nations get divided into mutually-opposite interest-groups as the result of injustice and oppression caused by unequal socio-economic transformation and political domination, liberation theologians have included commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society in the definition of religion.

The latter half of twentieth century has witnessed almost contemporaneous occurrence of the phenomena of religious resurgence and religious fundamentalism throughout the world. Their occurrence has been contemporaneous, otherwise there is no ideological commonality between the two. The former revives man's faith in religion and religious values which can be used to overpower the discord and violence in society, thus inspiring humankind to work for common weal. On the other hand, the latter believes in the inerrancy of scripture and literal acceptance of the creeds as fundamentals. This breeds exclusivism and a tendency to monopolize truth, thus erecting boundaries between different faith-communities, and making religion a tool in the hands of clergy who tend to use it for their own personal agenda.

Moral Resurgence:

Religious resurgence must not be confused or identified with religious fundamentalism. There are vital differences between the two. It is a very dangerous trend to check and eliminate religious resurgence, along with or in the name of religious fundamentalism, with a view to eliminating conflict and violence in society. Unfortunately, however, some self-righteous states as well as some equally self-righteous majority communities have taken up both the phenomena together as a challenge, as a threat to be met with, thus creating conflict at the international and community levels. However, the conflict/violence thus caused can in no way be called religious in nature. This is, no doubt, caused in the name of religion, but in fact it is the result of what political authorities do to gain more political and economic clout and what fundamentalists do to assert their monopoly over truth and their desire to dominate others.

A corollary of fundamentalism is evangelism or proselytizing. It is a well known fact that while mutual witnessing promotes mutual respect, proselytizing devalues the faith of the other. Advocates of proselytizing do not accept men, women and children of other faiths as genuine persons, with genuine faith, those who see the universe but see it in different ways. They tend to believe that we know God, and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong¹ and that “we are saved and you are damned”.² They believe in the myth of uniqueness of their faith. They believe in ‘my religion, the only way’. They take other religions fake and members of other faith-communities as pagan. They try to establish the superiority of their faith by comparing their doctrinal ideals with the practices of other faiths, forgetting that religious practices in no tradition come equal to the doctrinal truth. They also forget that absolute truth-claims can easily be exploited to incite religious hatred and violence.

Faith is Basic:

Ever since the recorded history of humankind, human society has always been a religiously plural society. Each religion was born into a religiously plural world and developed throughout its history in that context. Sometimes even co-religionists living in different regions and eras differed from one another in their religious beliefs and practices. In spite of these differences, no faith-community is on average better or worse than any other. All religions are different historical manifestations of the ultimate Reality/Truth, and that they are genuine paths toward the realization of God/Truth. No religion can claim to be unique or norm for others: the Absolute One is manifest in all of history, but no historical manifestation of the Absolute One can be absolute. The ultimate reality/truth is beyond the scope of complete human understanding, and it finds expression in diverse ways in the world’s different religions. “God’s voice speaks in many languages, communicating itself in a diversity of intuitions. The word of God never comes to an end. No word is God’s last word.”³

Peaceful Co-existence:

The fact of religious plurality notwithstanding, exclusivistic⁴ attitude towards other faiths has never fully died down. In ancient times, this attitude did not have as serious social and theological implications as it has in present times. Earlier, people lived in their own self-enclosed camps, blissfully ignorant of what happened or existed outside. A limited geographical region was their complete universe, with little contact with outside people. However, globalization has put an end to the era when the complex of religious and cultural superiority validated and encouraged a particular religious and racial group for the political and economic exploitation of the so-called savage and pagan people. This complex was

once supported and sanctified in the Indian sub-continent by the Muslim regime as well as by the Christian West. Almost the same kind of attitude was (and is still) faced by the Indians/Asians as they migrated to the predominantly Christian West. Colonialism has since given way to democratic republicanism in most of world, thus resulting in the change of situation in India as well as in the West.

A Quranic statement also aptly sums up the right attitude towards other religions: 'the origin of the divine light in the world is neither eastern nor western [in other words, revelation is not region-specific] but the metaphors with which Divine revelation is expressed in a mundane language are necessarily one'. This provides genuine character to all religions. Similarly, a Jewish theologian has, with the help of a metaphor, beautifully summed up the contemporary social reality of religious plurality as will of God. He says, "It is not necessary for the entire flock to graze on one pasture nor to enter and leave the master's house through just one door. It would be neither in accord with the shepherd's wisdom nor conducive to the growth of his flocks."⁵

In particular Indian context, we know that religious plurality has always been a part of Indian social situation. Among religions of Indian origin are included Jainism and Buddhism from the *sramanic* tradition, Hinduism and Sikhism. Two of the Semitic religions, Islam and Christianity, now have their followers in significant numbers. Both of them came to India first as traders and gradually settled down as rulers of the land. The history of relationship among religions of Indian origin and between Indian religions on the one hand and Semitic religions on the other makes an interesting study. The former are products of the same culture yet they differ from one another on several points in the articulation of their respective metaphysics and social philosophy. The Semitic religions originated in entirely different cultures, and both of them happened to be missionary faiths. Thus, they strongly believed in the myth of their uniqueness and superiority vis-à-vis Indian religions. Consequently, their relationship with the latter was never smooth and harmonious.

Obscurantism:

A cursory look at our past shows that there have cropped up now and then differences and conflicts between different faith-communities. Such conflictual situations have always been the handiwork of 'certain elements' in a community created to retain their position in religious hierarchy. They get used by powers that be - may they be emperors or politicians - to perpetuate their authority. Such elements are present in every community, and they play their fundamentalist card using the alibi of religious virtue or nationalism or homogenization of society as uni-lingual, uni-religion. Consequently, minorities become more conscious of their religious identity, and unable to cope with the present, they fall back on real or imagined religio-historical past and see it inversely as a futuristic projection. Such a situation further breeds fundamentalism - a constant threat to peace and harmony in inter-community relations. Fortunately, however, these different faith-communities have in general enjoyed a sort of unitive pluralism while acknowledging the beauty of diversity.

Among the religions of Indian origin, we find prevalent Hinduism an amalgam of various different - even contradictory ideologies - from atheistic to pantheistic, to deistic to monistic to mystical. It accepts each one of these as true within its own perspective. The conflict between the truth of one of these viewpoints and that of the other is expected because each viewpoint is only a partial perspective of the Divine. According to this logic, Hinduism can be taken as tolerant and open to other religions as it takes different sects/religions as

additional visions of the same divine reality. In practice, however, Hinduism is tolerant only so long as the other is willing to accept its position under the broader umbrella of Hinduism.

In the past the little conflictual noises amongst religions of Indian origin have been generally the result of the Hindu refusal to accept other traditions as distinct and independent of Hinduism. During the early phase of Buddhism, the cause was primarily two-fold: One, Buddhism was a proselytizing religion⁶ and Hinduism perceived it a potential threat. Two, the Hindu endeavour to prove Buddhism a part of Hinduism and Gautam Buddha one of the pantheon of various Hindu gods was not received enthusiastically. The *Visnu Puran* is an endeavour to assimilate the Buddha into the Vaishnava pantheon as an incarnation of Vishnu,⁷ thus rejecting the Buddhist claim of being a distinct religion.

Amity Vs. Discord:

Interestingly, there has been no instance of any serious bitterness in Hindu-Sikh relations up to the middle of the nineteenth century. The origins of the Hindu-Sikh tension is generally traced to Swami Dayanand (1824-83) who not only used derogatory remarks for the Sikh Gurus and the Sikh scripture but also refused to accept Sikhism as a distinct, independent faith. That is why some historians called it the Arya Samaj-Sikh tension.⁸ Dayanand also made sarcastic and damning remarks about other groups within Hinduism as well as towards other religions, including Islam.⁹ This kind of fundamentalist attitude has persisted in Hinduism with some other individuals and organizations also. No doubt, protagonists of such an attitude are only marginal, but their role becomes problematic when powers that be join hands with them.

Islam and Christianity, two major religions of Semitic origin having a sizeable following in India, have been missionary faiths and both enjoyed patronage of the ruling class for quite a long time. When Islam and Hinduism came together during medieval times, they had very little common with each other and in a way stood doctrinally opposed to each other. If Hinduism had an earlier history of a tendency to absorb unto itself any new tradition, Muslims believed in the myth of religious superiority and considered their religion as the final revelation and norm for other religions. In such a situation, conflict between the two was natural. As invaders and rulers, the attitude of the Muslims was to loot and molest the *kafirs*, to destroy their honour and places of worship, and to use force for conversion. The Muslim-Sikh struggle during the 17th and 18th centuries needs also be seen as the Sikh rejection of the exclusivistic attitude of the Muslim ruling class and a section of clergy.

The coming together of these two mutually-exclusive societies and their viewpoints was a sensitive and vital moment in history which contained within it possibilities of both creative synthesis and rejective hostility. The necessity of communication between these two communities, each speaking a different language and professing a different religion, resulted in the mixture of languages and thus giving birth to a new, common language. The interaction between the two was also the result of the assertion of a desire for religious co-existence as against the prevailing culture of distrust and disharmony, of religious intolerance and socio-political oppression. Rigidities loosened gradually, thus giving place to the evolution of a new religious *weltanschauung* which had a universal appeal. Both the Bhakti and Sufi movements, though each had its basic framework determined by the religion it derived from, were characterized by a liberal and eclectic theosophy and attracted followers beyond sectarian boundaries. This was the first serious effort towards mutual appreciation and sympathy¹⁰ between these two communities. It was also around

this time that Sikhism was born, a religion which is pluralistic in its approach toward other religions.

Evangelism:

The Christian west - the Portuguese, French, Dutch, Danish and the British - came to India between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Vasco da Gama arrived in Calicut in 1492 to seek 'Christians and spices'.¹¹ The Portuguese, who conquered Goa in 1510, acquired a reputation for cruelty and perfidy: "in religion they were intolerant to the extent of allowing no Hindu temple in Goa."¹² All the colonial powers – be they Portuguese, French, Dutch or English - used religion, through various missionaries, to validate their 'white man's burden' over the 'pagans'. The political situation has changed, and the idea of evangelism has also to change with the changing times. The choice of religion should be left to each individual, without any moral pressure or material inducement. Similarly, any opposition to genuine missionary work needs also be stopped.

Truth is always many-sided and each religion shows its one side only. If we confine our study and understanding only to one particular religion, our knowledge of Truth will be fragmentary. Multiple religions break down the clear effulgence of Light into a multi-coloured spectrum of human religious expressions. We may not be able to describe the infinite and inexpressible Absolute, but we can study how different people in different languages and cultures experienced God and how their scriptures have interpreted that experience. This implies that the ultimate Reality cannot be described as it is in itself, but only as it is thought and experienced in human terms.

Ideological Freedom:

Another important pre-requisite for social harmony is that people from every faith-community feel valued as individuals with their own distinct religious beliefs and practices. They should be encouraged to make, in their own way, their contribution towards eco-human welfare. They should have the freedom of conscience, with the only stipulation that this should not affect the freedom of others. Any ideology of religious intolerance is retrograde and is bound to fail despite all overt and covert assistance provided to it by some vested interests from time to time. The need is to relish the unity of India behind the vast diversity of religions and languages, rather than nurturing the dream of turning India into a uni-religious, uni-language and uni-cultural state. If we want to see our country and the world at large free from violence, "we have to learn to see others as our brothers and sisters. We need to discover how to affirm our own identity – be it as individuals or as a community – without threatening the identity of others."¹³



References

1. W.C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, 130-131
2. *ibid.*
3. Abraham Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays in Applied Religion*, [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966], 182
4. For detailed discussion on the concept and meaning of exclusivism and other related terms (inclusivism and pluralism), see Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London, SCM), 1983. This phraseology was used by Alan Race for the first time and it has since been accepted and supported by almost all theologians including Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and others.
5. Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Tr. Alfred Josephe), 107

6. Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India*, 482
7. See H.H. Wilson, Tr, *The Visnu Puran* (pp. 269-70):

When the mighty Visnu heard their request [the request of the gods to be protected from the *asuras*], he emitted from his body an illusory form which he gave to the gods and thus spake: 'This deceptive vision [Buddha] shall wholly beguile the *asuras*, so that, being led astray from the path of the Vedas, they may be put to death; for all gods, demons or others who shall be opposed to the authority of the Vedas shall perish by my might, whilst exercised for the preservation of the world. Go then, and fear not; let his illusive vision precede thee; it shall this day be of great service to you, O gods!
8. For details on the issue, see Ganda Singh, "The Origin of the Hindu-Sikh Tension in the Panjab" in *The Panjab Past and Present*, Vol. XI-II (October 1977)
9. For details on the subject, see Swami Dayanand, *Satyarth Prakash* [English translation by Durga Prasad under the title *Light of Truth*, published by Jan Gyan Prakashan, New Delhi]
10. J.E. Carpenter, *Theism in Medieval India*, p. 456.
11. The Christians he had in mind were perhaps a legendary people to be rescued from Muslim encirclement who would help him in his crusades. For details, see Percival Spear, *A History of India*, Vol. II, 62
12. *ibid.*, 63
13. Marcus Braybrooke, "Religion and Conflict", in Prithipal Singh Kapur and Dharam Singh, eds., *Perspectives on Sikhism*, 15