



TALKS
ON VARIOUS
OCCASSIONS.

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World Conference of Religions - Kochi-'91

RELIGION/RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE, FREEDOM AND PEACE.

Introduction

Notwithstanding the scientific achievements which brought about the advanced developments, the world has entered into a turbulent era with so much corruption, disasters and adverse calamities. We are enmeshed in this worldly predicament infested with social evils like injustice, aggression, violence, bribery, nepotism, smuggling, drug-trafficking, kidnapping etc. Evil goes unabated in most part of the world wiping out spiritual serenity. Einstein's "Science without religion is lame" is manifesting its truth as science in our times without a liberal religious concomitant has wrought equal help and harm to mankind. With human minds growing more corrupt and evil, morality, virtue and spirituality are in a critical state. The famines of Africa, the floods of China, the cyclones of Bangla Desh, the volcanic eruptions in Japan, the outbreak of brutal war in the Gulf, the agonising AIDS disease, population explosion, global warming and all such mishaps are apparent signs of humanity's waning merits. The results of evil seeds sown by us out of vehement passion, hatred and ignorance have ripened and these dire consequences now continue to haunt the world. The only solution is the restoration of virtue and morality through the promulgation of religious thought and teachings.

Religions

As defined by the Oxford dictionary, if the theory of God, the creator is religion, Buddha and Spinoza would never become religious leaders. If religion, as Haffoding puts, is a "conservation of values", all religions must be attributed with those values. Everything that is extant has its own value; it is only the quality and the quantity of that value which determines the intrinsic substantiality of a thing. So, what then is the value of religion?

Literally, religion is a word derived from the Latin word "religio" which means to bind. A principle of unification and harmonisation and any principle which binds us all together in a wholesome way is religion according to Dr. A. R. Mohapatra. Another equivalent term for religion is the Sanskrit word "Dharma" meaning to uphold. According to the XIVth Dalai Lama, any noble activity of body, speech and mind is Dharma or religion, which can save and hold one back from disasters. Thus any theory, principle, conduct and practice that upholds integrity and amity, sanity and spirituality, that which uplifts man from a lower mundane level to a higher plane of edification where one transcends the woes and worries of everyday life can be regarded as religion. In brief religion is an art of living a virtuous daily life in peace and harmony and finally attaining deliverance and salvation. The value of religion in short is nothing but human values - truth and love; justice and peace; freedom and righteousness; morality and spirituality. Therefore, it becomes an

established fact that all religions, theism or atheism, inspite of different conceptions and beliefs must meet this end of contributing towards justice, peace, freedom, and morality; lest their values be lost.

Buddhist Approach

Taking the value of religion into Buddhist context, let us consider the Buddhist approaches to contemporary problems with particular significance given to the struggle for justice, freedom and peace. As one of the oldest religions on earth, the teachings of Buddha has solaced and satisfied untold millions for more than two and a half millenia. It prospered as one of the largest religions both in the number of adherents and range of teachings. Rationality and compassion - these two exquisite Buddhist principles primarily made Buddhism an outstanding religion and philosophy. Buddha succinctly propounded his rationalism when he declared :

" Ye! the monks or the wise
Like assaying gold by burning, cutting and polishing
Must perfectly analyse my words,
Then accept them, but not simply by faith.

His vast and profound teachings, although numerous to suit the mental inclinations of different beings, are all rational facts, that can withstand any test and analyses. Buddha like Socrates knew that humans are rational beings with superior conscience and intelligence and therefore, based his teachings on valid reasonings and experiences to meet the analytical examinations of astute human minds.

Buddha's love and regard for all beings surpass other religious concepts of animals being created as food and servants for humanity, thus engaging them in torturous duties and eventually ending in slaughter houses - an inhuman treatment. For a Buddhist practitioner, compassion (Karuna) or in broader sense altruism is an indispensable characteristic and there is hope for supreme enlightenment only in the altruistic Boddhimind, an earnest wish to endow all the beings with every temporary happiness and ultimate liberation. Shantideva, an eighth century poet puts it in a logical verse :

" I must dispel others' sufferings
Because they are sufferings, like my own suffering.
I must benefit other beings
Because they are sentient, like my own body."

For Justice

With human minds becoming more deceitful, justice is fighting for its survival against injustice. From where does injustice arise ? Buddha proclaimed that the causes of all sins and evils are attachment, hatred and ignorance which in turn are caused by clinging to the self (Atma). Blindly grasping at the non-existent self, the notion of others arises and then I, you, my, and so on. This eventually generates discriminations and passions favouring One's side and despising others. The riddle of life and death, this whirlpool of sorrow and suffering, this illusory

world within and without, is a creation of our evil thoughts under the influence of the mistaken notion of 'self' - the non-existent culprit. So, the answer to all human inequities is this self or ego that kindles egotism and selfishness. This self if investigated can never be discovered, so it is absolute futility to cling to it and doom oneself in the beginningless cycle of rebirths.

Another excellent remedy to injustice, dishonesty, partiality etc is a deeper study and understanding of law of cause and effect (Karma). The more confidence we gain in the law of inevitable reward and retribution of our acts, the more we are concerned about what fate we are creating for ourselves. With fear of disgusting nemesis and hope of desirable results, a person's character gradually takes a good turn. Generosity and charity (Dana), the first of six perfections (Paramitas) is also an effective antidote for the social evils arising from selfish motives. Giving without expecting any reward and showing no favouritism whether friend or foe, kin or stranger can alleviate the notion of self and others. These principles and practices can enable us to enhance the practise of the righteous eight fold paths (Arya Astangika Marga) of right view, right intention, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Abiding ⁱⁿ the just and righteous eight-fold paths, one can make one's mind more veracious, truthful and magnanimous.

Towards Freedom

Equality or freedom from unwilling subjugation is a social right that any human being can claim. Nevertheless millions still remain suppressed and deprived of their rights, entangled in the social matrix of casteism and racism. As Andre Beteille asserts, "It is not true that the hierarchical values on which the distinctions of caste rests have been never challenged in Indian society before the modern age. It has often been pointed out that the first great protagonist of equality was Buddha." Lord Buddha was first of many leaders to break the social barrier of caste, class, sex, and race and proclaim all human beings to be equal. This can be inferred from his words, "You are your own guide* depends upon you." Buddha did not use the yardstick of social grouping to measure the nobility of a person but refuted the concept of estimating an individual's value and virtue through flesh, colour, blood and bones. Therefore much of the attraction that great leaders like Baba Saheb Ambedkar, Tagore and others had to Buddhism came from its social outlook, an outlook that was uncompromisingly egalitarian.

The reasons for Buddha's egalitarian principles are deeply rooted in his teachings founded upon sound philosophical investigations. "All composite things are doomed to extinction, exert yourself in vigilance." were Buddha's last words. All phenomena that are created are transient and impermanent (anitya) as a law of nature. Caste, class and colour are also fleeting and what we perversely apprehend is a flux or continuity, an aggression without a true nature, like a flower garment. A Brahmin is apt to

* I show you the path to liberation but liberation

change into a Shudra, black into white, male into female because they are impermanent. Where then should the racial and such prejudices and discriminations be focussed ?

As corollary to this law of change is the dependent-origination (Pratitya samudpada), the theory of relativity. Nagarjuna argued that all phenomena are dependently originated. Whatever is interdependent is devoid of inherent essence, like a dream. Because everything arises and is perceived relying upon causes and conditions, **all** the subjective and objective entities are without inherent essence. So are all castes, sex, race, and class devoid of independent inherent nature ~~except~~ ^{and just} the illusory projections of our perverted prejudices and discriminations. The nullification of the true essence or "essentialism" helps in generating compassion since compassion as skillful means (upaya) is intertwined with wisdom (prajna). That of being pragmatic in transforming a human character directly or indirectly is par excellence quality attributed to Buddha's philosophical teachings. Another Buddhist thesis for overcoming the dynamics of caste and racial prejudices is the concept of Buddha-nature (Tathagatagarba). All beings whether inferior or superior have the intrinsic seed of Buddha latent in them. Hence, is the prohibition of looking down on others with contempt for whatever reasons adopted.

To Peace

The debt that humanity has incurred to Buddhism regarding peace is immense. It is these two aspects of Buddhist thought : harmlessness and altruism, that helped Buddhism earn the faith and adherence of millions through ages. Buddha centred his teachings around non-violence and compassion, foreseeing them to be the sole means to universal amity and transcendental bliss. In our venture for a peaceful world, we must begin by seeking peace and harmony in each individual, then through families, communities, nations and finally the world over. Individual pacification begins with the eradication of physical and mental turmoil and development of mental calmness wherein the meditations of single-pointed concentration (samatha) and tranquil insight (vipassana) are highly credited with effectiveness. One superb way to cultivate love and peace is contemplation on the four immeasurable thoughts of spiritual love, compassion, joy and equanimity.

Among the range of challenges that the lovers and propagators of peace face is the massive destruction of precious human lives in bloody wars that humans though superior beings are crazy enough to deliberately commit. In addition to the belligerent tendencies of human minds, the heretical concepts of fighting and killing in the name of religion and god by religious fanatics add fuel to the fire. Buddhism however, prospered unstained till today without shedding a single drop of blood in its name. Here is a historical event which clearly shows Buddha's approach towards violence and bloodshed :

The compassionate Buddha was once at the banks of river Rohini, where the troops of Shakya and Koliya clans lay bound to clash

in a war after their dispute over the distribution of the water of river Rohini. Buddha while surveying the world with compassion saw this manoeuvre for the destruction of many precious lives, and thus intervened, asking, " Human blood or water, which of them is precious ?" The monarchs ashamed of their short-sighted folly disarmed and confessed before the compassionate lord. Buddha then taught a sermon on the evils and demerits of war.

Conclusion

Today, with human minds growing more wicked and sophisticated through thirst of material gain, the world is hovering over the brink of moral annihilation and spiritual bankruptcy. Everyone is set in a rat race, running headlong for worldly gains and fame to satiate their sensual cravings. The grip of evil is tightening, virtue and morality is waning rapidly and it is only us, the adherents of different religions who can rescue this declining virtue and morality through sincere practice of legacies of our saviours and prophets. We are in dearth and equally in need of a universal understanding for amity and solidarity - " cosmic religious feeling " as called by Einstein.

Let us, therefore, discard the past prejudices and discriminations and dismantle the wall of conceptual differences and march as one whole body with the weapons of religion and religious experiences on a triumphant crusade against evil. In this way we can someday realise our theme : "RELIGION AND HUMAN SOLIDARITY."

" MAY THE RIGHTEOUS FLOURISH ON THIS EARTH."