

Models of Religious and Spiritual Influences for Political, Social and Cultural Directions

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As a little child I often heard my mother recite a “mantra” which said “even as waters from the clouds, meandering along different paths return to the same ocean, so does one’s prayers to different forms of god ultimately reach the supreme being.” That one mantra laid the foundation to a strong belief that all religions and scriptures did influence one’s way of thinking, behaving and acting. Since the Vedic days to the present day thinkers, we find an unbroken continuous history of philosophy of the people of India. All hues of thought, be it idolatry, theism, monotheism to atheism all find a place.

Vedas affirm that there is something sacred in all life and all nature, that divinity pervades the entire universe. According to any tradition or scripture that recognizes such a spiritual component to life and to the world, it is always profoundly respected. My guru-bhai Swami Chidanandji often said that, “various religious systems that exist and prevail in this world today are ever so many ways of approaching the one supreme cosmic reality... Who is transcendental and cannot be encompassed within the confines of the limited experience of our finite sense, of our finite inner cognizing instrument of mind, intellect etc.” That supreme is known as PARA, which in the Sanskrit language means that which transcends, that which goes beyond and that which is beyond.

Within the context of the vedic religion the different paths of yoga... one through feeling... one through reasoning... one through con-

centration... one through active service... although apparently different are recognized as being of the one Supreme, non-dual cosmic reality.

All religions therefore exist and prevail in order to raise the human spirit toward its essential divine status... godly status so that man's nature becomes filled with the god like qualities of love, compassion, kindness, purity and with everything that is sublime, beautiful, holy and sanctifying.

The very fact that we are all gathered here today to understand if religions have influenced our political, social and cultural directions is proof enough that even when we see spiritualism corroding we are striving to reach out and hold on to those spiritual values. Today man has reached the moon, but global wars are still continuing with all their venom and destruction... robots are moving in as humanism is moving out. We are paying the price for advancement and civilization by moving in the direction of conflict and strife. We keep inflicting the wounds aided by more weaponry and atomic finesse. We must stop here right now and contemplate that there is something fundamentally wrong in man's thinking as we have failed to learn lessons from the two world wars. A peculiar trait of religion is that it has often been a source of division, conflict, bloodshed and war. Examples of these can be found in the Crusades, the wars of religion in Europe, "ethnic cleansing" in the former Yugoslavia, and in India we have the Kashmir problem fueled from across the border.

The women's initiative for peace in south Asia, went through the heartaches and silent cries of millions of sisters of south Asia who were the victims of enmity between two neighboring countries. This women's group was influenced by the higher values of spiritualism. Our motto was "GOLI NAHIN BILI", "no bullets but dialogue." Thus in the summer of 1999 WIPSA was launched with a conviction that women would be able to bring peace in the Indian subcontinent. We resolved to look within our souls and lo and behold we found bliss, pulsating there, we knew a spiritual era was on the threshold of humanity once again. The task set to

our generation was to reconcile the varying ideals of the converging religious patterns... weave them together to sustain and support, rather than combat and kill one another. We realized that we are living in a world of free interaction and we have no business to trample on the toes of our neighbors. We wanted to work toward building up a cohesive entity in south Asia. We knew that people to people contact would bring that understanding and love between countries. 41 of us decided to take the bus journey from New Delhi India, to Lahore Pakistan. Later this bus journey came to be known as the Lahore peace yatra. A whole new world of opportunity, advocacy and good will opened up. Our sisters in Pakistan welcomed us with open arms, warmth, love and of course songs. These were the moments of joy, for the first time sisters from two countries converged in harmony and goodwill. We also understood that we women who suffered the most from the consequences of war are never invited to the negotiating tables. I am today very proud to be a part of history.

This step is in keeping with the aspirations of the people of both countries, particularly the women who suffer the most in conditions of conflict and who have the highest stakes in peace. People to people contact is the surest path to peace. WIPSA's endeavors to keep this continued contact on a sustained basis has in some measure corrected perspectives about each other on both sides of the border. So today peace initiatives do begin in an environment relatively free of preconceived notions and misrepresentations. WIPSA is hopeful that the visit of the General will open a new chapter bearing the simplest and most profound title, PEACE, in the book of Pakistan-India relations and that this chapter will then underpin the hopes of future generations of South Asians.

Spirituality teaches patience and patience is what the people of Pakistan and India have exhibited in the 53 years of hostility... in the hope that the next year, or the next month will bring the nightmare to an end. But the nuclearization of both countries, each claiming to have outdone the other, had bought that proverbial patience to an end. It dawned on us women that in this game of

one-upmanship between both the governments, the people have been forgotten. Inexorable facts such as... it is the people who make countries, people who chalk destinies and it is the people who install governments, have become embedded in the popular imagination. Religion teaches us that centrality of people can never be overlooked or undermined, it is people who are at the heart of decisions. Consequently, the argument that political decisions should be detached from public sentiment is flawed logic that needs to be expunged totally. It is for this reason today that civil society in general and women in particular are demanding a space for intervention in the process of normalization of the relationship. A clear direction comes from ancient scriptures that there should be peace and no bloodshed and a commitment by the governments that the nuclear button not be pressed now or ever. No longer are people willing to be mute witnesses to their being written and re-written and destroyed by governments. We are no longer hesitant to stand up and be counted, we women today are determined to make the world a safe place for our children. The spontaneity with which people of both Pakistan and India responded to the people to people contact charted the course for an action oriented strategy. Needless to say this called for political sensitivity in both countries.

We who pride ourselves in being a secular modern society have sometimes to pause and think whether social integration and a just society can exist without “spiritual capital” derived from religious precepts. If we discard the spiritual sources as old and out-dated, where do we find the sources of growth, brotherhood or social justice?

While our scriptures are of the point of view of “sarvadharmasambhavana” that is treating all religions equally it is however felt that this is not secularism. The state should distance itself from religion but it cannot totally separate... sometimes to reform the state or political system we need the moralities or idealistic appeal of religion. And when religion degenerates, the state is under obligation to intervene. Of course, one must expect politicians to

appeal to religious identities and hatreds to get votes. A direct ban on such activities is at best futile and at worst encourages authoritarianism. This does not mean that those who uphold the ideals of secularism and those of democracy based on mass suffrage should give up hope. One should abstain from vain preaching. Freedom of dissent and freedom of expression is another principle which must be unconditionally applied to promoting secular ethos.

RELIGION AND CULTURE

As far back as the fifth century BC, Buddhism had a sweeping effect not only on the cultural and social day-to-day life of that civilization, but the rulers of that time adapted the principals of Buddhism in their administrative setup. So much so that Ashoka the Great, influenced by the teaching of Buddha, gave up the path of violence and adapted ahimsa or non violence as the main motto of his administration.

Waves of rejection of dogmas and decay of religion and ethics at various stages of development gave rise to a new thinking and many religions like Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism emerged. All these were born of the Indian thought and culture that could amalgamate the different styles of thought. Even religions that came from outside the country like Islam and Christianity found an honored place in India.

During the period 1192 to 1596 Sufis gained particular support through poetry and in the media of local languages. The most favored and popular Chiti order of Sufism professed the Sufi teaching theory of unity of being, oneness of existence, Yogic definition of Unity being was similar to thoughts from Persian poetry. 15th and 16th century poetry developed through poets like Kabir, Nanak & Surdas.

Not so far back in the 16th century, Akbar the great, the mogul ruler of India, was influenced by the dictates of all the religions and declared his state religion to be “Deen-E-Ilahi” which was really the essence of all the religions based on peace, good will and non violence.

In modern times Mahatma Gandhi was a symbol of integration, brotherhood and non-violence. The mahatma was greatly influenced by the Bhagvad Gita and various other scriptures. He adapted the precepts of truth, courage and non-violence in his daily practical life. It was because of his non-violent satyagrah that India won its freedom from the mighty British Empire. However, we have come a long way to the 21st century, to the days of gross materialism. There is a general feeling that religion does not play much of a role in our lives today. More often these religious ceremonies are looked at as rituals... take for instance, visits to churches, temples and mosques... What really happens? Some who visit these are firm believers and fully conscious of what is happening, while some have scant knowledge and awareness of what is happening. And yet there are those with no knowledge and also are perhaps fundamentalists. When we talk about religion we should also bear in mind the tremendous role played by faith. In my country they say that faith can move mountains, suggesting the great expectations which faith can generate. I would like to illustrate something that happened in India not so long ago when our national media came out with stories about a miracle surrounding milk drinking idols of lord Ganesh. These stories even received international attention. Maybe some of you would remember that a number of believers rushed to those temples and those who went there went because of their belief and faith. Although, many of us tried to find a rational explanation for this phenomena, pious believers remained unconvinced that what happened was not a miracle. Although religion and festivals linked with religion do play important roles in our lives the materialism we saw in the last years of the 20th century seems to have overtaken religion as a binding force within the family.

From the present perspective and contemporary study, it seems that our attitude, our way of life, our cultures and our civilizations of the past are so different from today's way of life, that they are creating divisions rather than unity. Many of these ways of life have been too narrow, too restricting and too inhibiting. It is noticed that these may lead to a stunting of personal growth and

social development. Recently in India it was the spirituality of the common adivasi people which led to their coming together in protest against building big dams... which would not only submerge their land but destroy their culture, their way of living and indeed their indigenous medicine. Hence we see that the rapidity of technological change has given rise to a number of social and psychological problems which make the modern world for all its technological marvels an uncomfortable and unfulfilling place to live. There is a growing feeling that the modern acquisitive society often prevents human beings from cultivating the warm affiliative side of human nature.

The question of whether religion should be separated from politics, culture and social development is a very important one. Today, the future of mankind depends on how we answer this question. The choice is to go ahead into the computer age or regress to medieval times or to combine both. Today we are just now at its fringe and it requires immediate attention. What is required urgently is the need to develop a morally informed consciousness which lays emphasis on self control and asks basic ethical questions to guide human kind in socially constructive use of knowledge. And for the discovery of these moral values and ethical norms we must return to religion and spirituality. By religion I do not refer to any particular sect or creed but to the eternal and universal religion which lays emphasis on the essential oneness and unity of all human kind. There are alternative spiritual paths available, paths supported by different philosophical systems to guide us in our quest for self perfection and social good through the judicious mix of self study, self control of body and mind and righteous conduct. But basically they all explore the same fundamental truths although they use different idioms. Thus spirituality is a quest for inner and outer perfection to face the challenges of life and to promote action and striving on law of dharma, to transform the world. It is a quest to evolve a design for living informed and guided by the divinity within us, which is what gives our life a meaning and a sense of purpose.

Throughout history religious thought has been a powerful factor in shaping the course of human evolution, I see it as the key religious mission is to make a powerful contribution to the evolution of a truly universal civilization of the future, based on both reason and spirituality. It should be the common endeavor of all of us who are engaged in the interfaith dialogue to evolve a truly universal value system for guiding human conduct in the increasingly interdependent world that we live in. Religion, the spiritual source of our inner life, links us to each other, to our society, and because spiritual truths cannot be stopped by national boundaries, to the international community and social order. But the integrating force of religion is only one side of the picture. On the other side is a component of our culture, the daily routine of raising a family, selecting a way of life, and our interacting within and outside the community.



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