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Critique of the Concept of Religion

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Religion stands for belief in a super-human controlling power, especially in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship. Here belief does not point to mere imagination or fanciful conjecture. It does imply (in its assertive content) that such a powerful super-human Being/God exists. He is claimed to be real and is revered as omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. This is the standard use of the concept of religion, predominantly noticed in case of all Semitic formulations. Under this theoretical set-up religion is bound to be theistic, either monotheistic or polytheistic. Anything, other than such formulations, is not designated as religion.

If one strictly adheres to this standard use of the concept of religion, then the so-called religions of the orient (especially of Indian origin) like the Jaina *dharma*, the Bauddha *dharma* and even the Hindu/Vaidica Sanatana *dharma* are not religions. Both Buddhism and Jainism have no acceptance of *Isvara*. The two *dharmas* do not have any conception of Creator-God. In case of Hinduism, the acceptance of *Isvara* is not that necessary too. A believer, a non-believer and even a dis-believer are all found to have been well accommodated within

this *dharmic* fold. It is said to be extremely heterogeneous, with no one sacred text or body of doctrine, unlike most religions. On account of all this, it seems to be reasonable not to assimilate *dharma* with religion. The distinction between them is conceptually clear and unambiguous.

Dharma stands for rule or law that binds men in society. Their relation remains intact. The socio-individual relation has been conceived in terms of being regulated by certain standard norms that keep the bond well balanced and composed. On the basis of that, *dharma* is identified as moral rule/principle which is not conceived as just limited to worldly mortal men. The principle is even extended to the speculated *devas*. It is notable that the *devas* like the *mānavas* and even the *dānavas* are depicted in the textual sources as both benevolent and malevolent too. In other words, it is worthy of note that in such *dharmic* set-up, the rule is more important and powerful than a person (whosoever he may be—a man or a demon or a divine being). *Dharma*, therefore, is not person-centric but rule-centric. As such, the reading of theologism on *dharma* seems to be an unwarranted superimposition. And, the rule or norm is not conceived to be something fixed, unalterable and arbitrary maxim.

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In order to maintain social cohesion and solidarity dharma is subject to modification under varied situation, if it is found as reasonably necessary.

With this initial background, it can be held that the concept of *dharma*, in its theoretical position at least, is not necessarily to be tied up with religion. *Dharma* is rather closely related with morality and ethics in the empirically bound socio-human transaction. It is gratifying that of late there has been due recognition of the distinction between Semitic religion and oriental *dharma* at the international level along with national acceptance.

II

Science is meant as a branch of knowledge conducted on objective principles involving the systematized observation of an experiment with phenomena. The word: phenomena, in this context, primarily means natural order that includes physical, biological and even social also. In this way, we come across biological, physical and social sciences. The formal study of mathematical axioms, principles, numbers etc. and the formal study of the validity of different forms of reasoning and arguments, employed in logic, are also classified as scientific. As tools, those principles are duly applied in the relevant concrete situations, without forsaking their formal structure.

However, one important point is to be noted in this connection. A scientific study of any of the aforesaid formulations is clearly identified to be specific, belonging to a particular branch of knowledge, well determined, clear and cogent. It is never designed to be all pervasive or all encompassing in its claim about the entire phenomena with all its multifarious facets. Such a move is rather detrimental to the very identity of different specific types of sciences.

Of course, there is meaningful research being carried on in different areas to explore the avenues for inter-disciplinary novel studies, not previously noticed in the traditional form of set patterns or groupings. For instance, a combined study of physics and astronomy, biology and chemistry, even sociology and biology are evolved and well demarcated. But, it is notable that such new studies in the field of scientific pursuits are also specific and determinate in their nature and scope. The attempt of unifying the results of all scientific enquiries under one single universal discipline is not feasible. This is not because of any arbitrary check, but because it is by itself both unscientific and implausible.

If one makes a careful and sincere study of both religion and science (in their theoretical framework), one can

notice that there is remarkable difference among both with regard to their respective account of subject-matter, method of investigation/enquiry and the limits. Science, in general, deals with phenomena; religion, in general, deals with trans-phenomenal realm of divinity and spirituality. Science is confined to sense; religion is extended to supra-sense. Science is, more or less, this-worldly, religion is, by and large, aimed at other-worldly form of existence. Science is engaged in raising specific issues and is bent upon explaining those in the particular setting; religion aims at posing a generalized question of universal set-up and to explain such questions by way of certain theistic surmises/vision/mystic trance. Scientific method is, more or less, observational and experimental. Its hypotheses/conjectures are framed; but those are subsequently validated by the application of verifiability/falsifiability/confirmability and so on. The so-called method of pursuing the realm of transcendental divinity that is advocated by the religionists in general, is found to be deeply contemplative, meditative and finally aiming at some form of mystic intuitive vision. This is found to be more or less the case with a firm believer.

III

Some of the renowned thinkers of the past century (*cf.* Radhakrishnan) have tried to minimize the gulf between science and religion by suggesting that, at a deeper level, it can be realized that both science and religion have the common goal, viz. Reality as such. Despite the methodological differences, there is the common aim, i.e. to be enlightened about the whole universe/creation. The ultimate issues like the nature of human destiny, the very being of man in the entire cosmos, man's possibility of attaining salvation, union of oneself with God/divinity, man's being fit to get His compassion and grace etc. do recur in human mind irrespective of the fact whether he is a commoner, a poet, an artist, a religionist, a philosopher (in the sense of a speculative metaphysician), a free-lance intellectual and even a scientist. There are found to be a number of great scientists of exceptional calibre like Albert Einstein, Julius Robert Oppenheimer who have shown indications for some trans-empirical concern for the whole humanity on ethico-religious basis over and above their own brilliant scientific background.

Despite its appeal at the unsophisticated common platform, such suggestion as hinted before seem to be not that rigorous from the standpoint of cool, dispassionate and balanced reasoning. Firstly it is not clear as to how Reality becomes the common goal of search for both science and religion. Being area-specific/

subject-specific, science cannot consistently raise issues about Reality as such. It is not within its purview. Such a move, from the scientific point of view, seems to be rather unwarranted and baseless.

A religionist starts with the basic assumption that there is Reality which is the all-inclusive whole and that cannot be accounted satisfactorily unless it is supposed that it is creation of one single super-human power, i.e. God who is infinite and perfect in all respects. Apart from the counter-response to such assumption that those are not scientifically established, another query can be raised in this context. Is the term Reality, employed in the discourse, descriptive or classificatory? That means: does the term refer to any descriptive content or is it the outcome of combining different branches of knowledge into one generalized whole, out of sweeping conjectural demand or out of factual necessity? The demand is not factual as it is not duly evidenced. The conjectural demand may be out of human thought/expectation but that does not necessitate anything about real. It is odd to hold that thought entails real.

Supposing there are X number of branches of human knowledge in different fields of investigation. Any attempt of combining such branches would amount to one unified whole, and that would be only finite not infinite. This shows that the leap from finite to infinite is not rationally cogent. The theologian's attempt of justifying the existence of infinite being from the finite beings is thus found to be futile. In this context one is reminded of Sankara's critical comment on the Naiyayika's theological argument concerning creation. Again, if one holds that there is no fixed number of branches of human knowledge and there is the continuing process of exploring newer branches in future, then in that case, the combination of actual and possible number of branches cannot be formulated at all to make it a self-sufficient whole unit. In this way, it may be seen that the search for the whole of creation or the supreme creator of the whole universe becomes an implausible endeavour. Any move to suppose the whole of universe either as finite or as infinite turns out to be somewhat obscure.

So also the question is raised about the creator of the universe. Is the act of creation possible within time or without time? Is it done once for all or is it being carried on ever? If so, whether there is at all no end of creation or creation comes to end at the state of full destruction? In what manner, can those two phases be related? Likewise, there are a number of serious issues raised in that context with regard to various theological claims and the questions that are raised are only to explore and locate the basis of intelligibility of certain crucial theological

assertions and never bluntly denying those from one obdurate atheist's point of view.

IV

Both religion and theology seems to have a basic presupposition that there are certain genuine questions that may be characterized as 'ultimate whys'. Accepting the legitimacy of such questions, a religionist holds its position on the basis of unqualified faith or belief that is rooted on the age-old tradition to which he adheres to either by birth or by conversion. A theologian, on the other hand, studies theistic religion with a view to analyzing rationally its element of faith. It can, however, be noted that the religious belief/faith does not hold simply as being personal to the believer concerned. There is also the clear manifestation of advocacy of a particular religious faith to others. The communal and institutional aspect of religion cannot be justifiably ignored. Religion, as being followed and practiced, cannot be held as just being accepted on simple personal faith. Any sort of personal faith cannot thrive in a trans-social situation. Its root has to be located in someway or other in a trans-social situation. Its root has to be located in someway or other in a group or community. May be, the person himself does not propagate or even persuade others to share his belief; but that does not rule out the possibility of that belief as incommunicable. Even if the particular believer does not himself advocate, the fact still remains that his faith/belief has an impact (either positive or negative) on the concerned group/community and, in that way, a common belief-framework does originate. In course of time, it is likely that due to its strong emotional appeal or heavy persuasive force, it touches gradually a larger section of people and the belief/faith becomes institutionalized as a religious movement. So, it can be seen that religious faith may have its start in a particular person but the very logic of faith does not warrant its privacy in the exclusive sense of the term. The element of sociality/publicity is, of course, involved within its nature and no religionist can validly take the plea that it is purely a personal affair and he has his own freedom to abide to that, whatever impact (positive or negative) it has on group or society. In other words, the institutional and the communal element does become a vital aspect of religious structure and it cannot be gainsaid.

Once this point is conceded, it can also be well observed that religion gives rise to the formation of group/community/inner circle and the aim is not so much to explore the rational justification of the core-belief, but more to safeguard the interest of its set beliefs about

the spiritual/supernatural/suprasensual world either appealing to emotion or to take resort to some sort of power-mechanism or both. The rational and judicious probe is kept to the minimum. And, consequently, it is held that religion is a matter of pure personal faith and no rational scrutiny is of any avail here. If that is the last point, then it becomes highly eccentric and even cannot entertain a forum of free and open-textured dialogue.

V

Of course, non-interference over one's likes and dislikes, beliefs and disbeliefs, faith and unfaith is acknowledged on the just ground that interference contrarily affects man's legitimate freedom, free-choice and self-dependency. But, at the same time, it is also significant to note that such personal features do originate within the social platform and thereby their impact on the social strata cannot be set aside. Directly or indirectly the rigid belief-structure gives rise to the formation of dogmas and taboos and those, in turn, become detrimental to social cohesion and solidarity. The freedom of man has to be envisaged in and through man-in-society and never bypassing this salient point. The undue emphasis on personal element becomes counter to the very ideal of social morality in which the individual interest is not sacrificed but is well regulated within the solid social-bond.

Religion, by and large, seems to have given primary (at times singular) emphasis on spirituality, neglecting the common social welfare and development. It is quite often propelled that socio-individual morality is not fully discarded but is well accepted insofar as it works as an effective means for the attainment of spiritual goal of transcendence. But, it is noted that both in the common ordinary level and also among the intellectuals in general, socio-individual morality operates without spiritual authoritative supremacy. Rather moral sense, being supervened by some external factor, looses its own autonomy and such a move adversely affects its own being. Morality and spirituality do have their distinct use

of operation in the conceptual framework. Any move to assimilate those under one canopy brings only unclarity and confusion.

In this context, some have moved on to distinguish between religious spirituality and (what they term as) secular spirituality. According to this formulation, religious spirituality seeks to develop the idea of inter-relationship and inter-dependence of all beings, living in harmony with nature and the entire cosmos. The secular spirituality, on the other hand, is said to be boosting up inter-dependence in and through empiric scientific mechanism and the modern science of ecology is instantiated in this regard.

But, what exactly is the ground of such distinction? The term: spirituality lexicographically means concern of spirit as opposed to matter. It does involve something sacred, holy and divine. It is concerned with the admittance of soul/spirit as distinct from matter. If this standard and sanctioned use of the concept of spirituality is adhered to, then to make a proposal for secular spirituality would be obviously untenable. A secular outlook cannot swallow something that is trans-empirical, sacred and not profane. Morality is socio-human necessity and it is well operated within the secular platform without being goaded by any sort of spiritual authoriality. Without believing on the transcendental existence of soul/spirit and even the other world of divinity, there is clearly no hindrance of one being moral and secular in the worldly empirical plane. Even Buddha *dharma*, at least in its theoretical construction, does profess a non-spiritual, positive, secular morality and it does continue to have its impact among men to a considerable extent.

Hence, it seems very much necessary to rethink about the very basis of the concept of religion *vis-à-vis* science. It is, perhaps, no significant move just to have a defensive mechanism that is already noticed to be so obsolete and outmoded. A thorough modification is necessary to make religion somehow reasonably housed in the human-psyche in the twentyfirst century. It has to move along with science and not in lieu of that.

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