

A HARMONY PERSPECTIVE FOR THE MULTI-RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

We are fortunate to live in a world, which is increasingly multi-dimensional. More and more countries are becoming characteristically multi-religious. The traditional mono-track perspective and approach of life wouldn't respond to the challenges of the present day context. We need to search for unifying elements in the different religious traditions, in order to find a human community permeated by divine promptings. The following harmony perspective evolves from this context.

1. HARMONY

The word 'harmony' has its roots in music. Harmony is a pleasing combination of notes sounded together to make chords. It is not a single note, but a concord between many notes. It is an orchestra in which different solo players are conducted in such a way that they create a single musical effect of fine sentiments. It is a co-ordination between singing, playing and dancing, which gives an experience of complete music. It is like a unique spring, which produces an ever-elevating feel of togetherness.

In the general context, harmony is a collection of related things, which agree or match one with another. It is a union of various parts, which co-operate or work together for a common purpose as well as with mutual benefit. The different parts function with an equality of importance. Agreement of feelings and thoughts, interests and tastes, aims and opinions, colours and shapes, traditions and practices and streams and strands determine the *raison d'être* of its existence.

Harmony is a holistic outlook. It is a way of unifying the various parts so as to form a single whole. Wholeness is beauty. With a variety of components fitted together well, it ensures a sense of completion. It brings different aspects together in mutual association. It gives meaning to the given elements, by virtue of the sense of sharing existing among them. It is dynamism of the many towards one as well as the one towards many. Harmony, thus, would mean a thorough

integration of the multifarious dimensions of creation as well as human society.

2. DIALOGUE

Dialogue is the way to achieve harmony. It makes it necessary for one to open up to the other. It is not just a conversation, but also a positive attitude of good will towards the other. It involves learning from the other as well as respecting, loving, serving and promoting the other. It is a give and take; it is a question and answer. It is mutual relation, mutual conversion and mutual transformation. It is a related existence. It is a shared language, a shared ideology, a shared culture, a shared commitment, a shared faith, a shared conviction and a shared spirituality. It is a co-journey of life, a joint pilgrimage to God. Dialogue leads to harmony; harmony proceeds from dialogue; and both are complementary.

Dialogue is a democratic concept of life. It assures every one his or her place. It refrains from all sorts of encroachment of the other. It takes fine care of the reality of diversity in life. It attends to the singularity of each dimension and attempts mutual inter-action for enrichment and for an integrated growth. It is a humble way of life. It maintains an aesthetic view of life. It implies a brotherly-sisterly and friendly style of life in relation to one-another. It is a spiritual approach of life. Dialogue ends in harmony and harmony begins with dialogue.

3. THE NON-RELIGIOUS FACE OF LIFE

One is a human being first, only then one is a religious. One is born into the world as a human being; only afterwards one becomes a religious. Being a human being is of primary importance. Being a Hindu, a Christian, a Muslim, a Sikh or any other is second in priority. Sabbath is for man, and not otherwise. Religion is at the service of the human being. To reverse the same would be abnormal. Belonging to a religious sect is for the purpose of making a good or better human being. The quality of human person matters first and foremost. The label of a particular religious following often complicates the matter. To consider the religious persuasion absolute and independent of human nature is a sheer misunderstanding. It is a sure way to get derailed in life. The spontaneous process of life is found in the human track. That deserves the top consideration. Human life, as well as life, is fundamentally non-religious.

Every human being is subject to the cycle of birth and death. Hunger and thirst as well as sleep and waking up apply to all. Food,

clothing and shelter are primary requirements for all. Sensations and sensitivities are a common phenomenon. The five elements of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch are mediums of basic functioning for everyone. Thinking and feeling, imagination and experience, aspirations and ambitions, hopes and disappointments, success and failure, health and sickness, joys and sorrows, peace and tension, order and disorder are universal human factors. Work, whatever may be its type, is the way of life, not only for survival but also for happiness. Male and female are the inevitable components of creation everywhere, the same way. Family is the mode of human life all over. Psychology and spirituality as well as biology and physiology of the humans are basically the same. Every human being has the natural need of loving and being loved. Closeness and separation, presence and absence affect all beings. Good and evil are found in the whole world. Weaknesses and strengths are in all persons. All human beings are endowed with inspirations and insights, though varied in their dimensions. The process of learning, education and culturing is open to all. The achievements of self-realization, wisdom and enlightenment are the universal purpose of the humans.

Products of human civilization are general and have neither religious label nor binding. Roads, rail tracks, airways and sea routes are common. People travel together irrespective of religious affiliations. Professions and services, educational provisions and jobs are open to all. Items of daily needs, market inter-relations of buying and selling bear no religious brand. Sicknesses and medical service have no religion. Marriages, food habits, dressing habits etc. have become more of a common interest. Cities are all the more becoming cosmopolitan. Religious following does not affect most of the details of life.

Nature is no religious land, too. Nature treats everyone equally. The sunshine and the rains come down upon everyone, the same way. Famine, earthquake, drought, food etc. are inflicted upon all the people alike in a given area. The sun, the moon and the stars are beyond religious boundaries and cannot be controlled by religious regulations. The seasons of winter, summer, monsoon etc. affect all, though in more or less degrees, irrespective of religious persuasions. The beauty and fragrance of the flowers, the fruits, the greenery and the immense variety of things in nature appeal to all. The waters and the earth benefit everyone beyond the barriers of denominations. The springs, the streams and the rivers purify and make fresh each and everyone who approach them without any religious reference. All beings, all-human beings, survive, subsist and flourish on nature. The nature does not discriminate with anyone

regarding her resources. She takes care of everyone with her motherly affection, with a characteristic sense of equality, with out any special religious or other considerations.

4. UNITY IN DIVERSITY

The concept of unity makes sense only when the fact of diversity is acknowledged. Diversity has necessarily to be oriented to unity. Unity in diversity would mean diversity in unity as well. Diversity implies the recognition of difference. When the singularity of each member is accepted and integrated into a single whole, there is unity. Unity in diversity, in other words, refers to the inner dynamics between one and many. They are like the two sides of the same coin. Being 'many' is a material and scientific approach whereas being 'one' is a spiritual and artistic approach. 'Many' is an intellectual and analytical approach. 'One' is a psychological and experiential approach. These approaches and dimensions are not contradictory to each other but are complementary.

Reality is multi-dimensional. Each person sees the whole through a part, through one's personal window. A complete view is available in the harmony vision. It is only together we touch the immense variety of human experience and the universality of human life. Accordingly, each religious tradition is a perspective of life, of the human and of the divine. It is only together the religious perspectives can meaningfully approach the unfathomable mystery of the divine. So, co-ordination between the male and female, east and west, north and south, believer and unbeliever, the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, the powerful and the powerless as well as between different perspectives, faith positions, religious traditions, castes, classes, professions, ideologies, languages, cultures and the like become imperative for unity in diversity.

5. COMMONALTIES OF RELIGIONS

Religion, at its most basic sense, is an approach to life. It is a believing way of life. It is a faith response. It is a motivation and liberative force in life. It is an orientation to the human and the divine, at the same time. It is a foundational inspiration of life. It is a call to go beyond. It is a vision of life and is a way of interpreting the voice of the Divine. It is a system of values and is a process of enlightenment. It gives a direction to life and accelerates the quality of life. It refers to the consciousness of life and to the spiritual nature of the humans. It is the depth dimension and

the integrative principle in life. All these fundamental dimensions of religion are common to all religious traditions, in a more or less fashion.

This perspective of religion takes us to the firm conviction that **the humans have a common heritage as well as heredity**. The whole creation, i.e., the nature and the human society, is a single whole. It has originated from and basically belongs to the Creator. Moreover, the nature belongs to the human society and the human society belongs to the nature, too. All the resources of life are a 'common heritage' of the human society. That would mean to say that all great men of the world, founders of all religious traditions, all religious scriptures, all religious paths and faiths are a common heritage of the humanity. The thought that 'my God, my religion, my religious scripture, the founder of my religion, are my own and the religions, scripture and founders of others are theirs' smacks of a divided and confused mind. The concept of 'yours and mine' is a material one and it enslaves one to the world. I have a basic belonging to myself and to whatever that is mine by the situational gift of the Creator. But a spiritual outlook of life invites us to rise above the boundaries of 'yours and mine' and thus to consider all that is found in the human society gifts of the same God and a common heritage. Experience of the common heritage will elicit in us a consciousness that 'we belong to each other'; 'we belong together'. The human kind collectively belongs to the divine. The divine belongs to the whole humanity, in an equal manner, too.

A Copernican worldview of life brings religions to a common platform. As the earth and the other planets are placed around the sun in rotation, so also religions find themselves in an orbit around the Higher Power. Spirit is at the centre and all religions are at the periphery, oriented towards and rotating around the Spirit. The Divine is the pivot of all religious perspectives. If religions are given undue importance, the Divine gets sidelined and the equilibrium of the Copernican vision of life gets lost. The ambition of any religious tradition to be at the centre would violate the Spirit or the Divine. Justice as well as courtesy demands that every religious approach keeps itself within its own limit. This vision maintains a sense of democratic equality and is the common thread, which binds all religious approaches into a single chain of Spirit-bound life. Life is the central issue and all religious systems and paths derive meaning and relevance for their existence by being subservient to it.

A spirituality of complementariness gives religious traditions a common base. Every religious tradition has a unique identity. But then, this identity should not be an isolated identity, cut off from the identities of other traditions. In the presence of the other, a related identity

develops. When the individual and the social aspects of the identity are coupled together there is a more developed and mature identity. And that is the identity, in the right sense of the word. Similarly, to speak of a Christian spirituality, a Hindu spirituality, an Islamic spirituality, a Jain spirituality, etc. would mean a compartmentalized or unrelated concept. Spirit and spirituality cannot be divided according to different religious traditions. As a matter of fact, there is only human spirituality. There can certainly be a Christian dimension of spirituality, a Hindu dimension of spirituality, a Muslim dimension of spirituality, a Jain dimension of spirituality, etc. But, these dimensions have to share their singularities with each other. At that juncture, real spirituality will begin to evolve, in a sense of togetherness. The outcome is a common spirituality. Here the depth dimension of rootedness in one's faith position and the horizontal dimension of relatedness to other's faith positions meet. At this meeting point the double-dimensional faith opens both partners to the presence of God, which is in fact multi-dimensional. This reality is categorically stated in these words: "By dialogue we let God be present in our midst, for as we open ourselves to one another we open ourselves to God" (Pope John Paul II, Chennai, India, Feb. 5, 1986).

The concept of complementariness introduces **a common spirituality**. Being complementary would mean one completes the other, one purifies the other and one enriches the other. As male and female are complementary to each other, so are all human beings, all religious paths, all languages, and all ideological approaches one to another. There is no superior and no inferior, but only co-travelers in life. The concept of complementariness proposes an open-ended dynamics. The spirituality of complementariness takes care of a sense of humility and a spirit of democracy. This is a familial and communitarian style of being religious. This pluralistic spirituality is a joint way of attempting the attainment of the same one Divine, one Absolute, one God, one Infinite, and one Supreme power. To go towards the realm of the Spirit beyond the boundaries of religious systems is spirituality. This is the common spirituality of the different religious traditions. This is, in fact, a higher spirituality of the humans.

6. EMERGING UNIFYING ELEMENTS

The bonds that unite are stronger than the walls that separate us. Religion, by its very purpose, is supposed to unite. But, unfortunately,

the world history proves otherwise! Religions have divided the humanity into uncountable factions and are still doing so. But if religions do not unite, they wouldn't liberate human beings, either. If they only scatter and enslave, they would lose their relevance as a bothersome heavy weight upon the humanity. Religions can unite the humans and they should inevitably do so. Unity is walking together, and that is indeed the way to peace. Dividing is the path to perdition. Pope John Paul II says, "either we learn to walk together in peace and harmony or we drift and ruin ourselves and others" (World Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi, International Year of Peace, Oct. 27, 1986)

Positive energies need to be re-discovered and increased. Unifying drive is to be promoted on a universal level. The uniting force will definitely become stronger if every religion pledges to go beyond itself. A critical self-evaluation is called for. Certain insulated traditions, frozen doctrines and outdated practices ought to be revised. The dictum makes full sense: 'less language, more comfort'. The political overtones increasingly at play in the religions are to be identified and eliminated. Theological war between religions does not bring any credit to the Divine, but only defames Him. A spirit of dialogue has to guide the religious traditions towards a process of **self-transformation**. A liberative response to this vital need, no doubt, will produce an element of unity.

The genius of Indian culture is characteristically '**Vasudhaivkutumbakam**', i.e. the concept of a world family. The whole creation is one single family. The Creator is the head of that family. The whole human society is one single family. The Divine is the head and centre of that family. We are citizens of the human society. This noble concept of 'world citizenship' should broaden our hearts and minds and keep us unified. The spirit of universal brotherhood should be the driving force in our life. And that will assure the unity of the human race as well as the whole creation.

Being in limits is the essential plight of whatever that is created. All the elements of the creation are bound by time and space. All the human persons, all the ideologies, all the regulations and policies, all the languages, all the cultures and practices, all the religious traditions and perspectives are affected by this law of nature. So, claim to infallibility and complete correctness by any person or sector cannot, in any way, be justified. One shouldn't attempt to bite more than one's mouth can contain! Inclination to possess truth and monopolize salvation contradicts the reality of the limitedness of the human situations. That underlines the fact that the religious traditions, like other factors of life, are just limited.

Hence, all religious traditions are like a '**mirror**' to each other. One can examine the veracity of one's spiritual vision, fitness of one's religious faith and the quality of one's human character in the presence of the other, and vice versa. They are '**made for each other**'. They need each other for their mutual purification, enrichment and relevance. Together the diverse religious traditions pledge to transcend the limitations unto better human and spiritual prospects.

The different religious traditions are like the '**rays**' of the same sun. Individually they are just one single ray of the Spirit and together they reflect the diverse aspects of the Spirit. According to Raimando Panikkar, the religious paths are like a '**rainbow**' (Intra-religious Dialogue, Paulist Press, New York, Intro. pp. ix-xxi). As the sun's light is refracted into a spectrum of colours, so is the divine light refracted into diverse religious traditions, reflecting the same spiritual light in different degrees. They are irreplaceably unique colours and only together they form a rainbow. And only in the togetherness the unparalleled beauty of the rainbow shines, too. So also, the different religious streams will reflect a special spiritual effect of the Divine only in their '**togetherness**'.

A harmony culture needs to be evolved among the multifarious religious approaches. A highly self-evident and inspiring model for this harmony culture could be seen in the '**many parts of the body functioning as one single body**' (Icor.12.12-28). All the parts are equally important. One part dominating over the other or suppressing or replacing the other would make the whole system of nature topsy-turvy. They function together smoothly in a pure spirit of natural democracy, par excellence. The diverse religious traditions of the world have this singular ideal as a perennial source of inspiration for a harmony culture.

Different religious traditions have to work together. Working together elicits a sense of 'we-feeling' and unity. '**Multi-religious co-operative schemes**' should be envisaged for humanitarian purposes. Joint efforts will necessarily facilitate an existence in relation. Inter-religious relation is a theory. '**Interpersonal relationships**' between persons of different religious following is the practical form of religious harmony. Therefore they need to be promoted. Interfaith units are to be pioneered in the form of '**Neighborhood Community**' in which the multi-dimensionality of faith and life is reflected to the details. Interfaith collaboration by way of '**social concern**' will assure a better society, which highlight better human and spiritual values. Good will, respect, understanding, love and service towards each other is the basic diet for a harmony culture. Searching for and promoting the 'universal value' of all

religious paths should be a common commitment, which will strengthen this culture of harmony. When the religious traditions prove to be a '**good news**' to each other, the harmony culture is bound to flourish. Religious traditions should be like the '**streams and rivulets**', which proceed from the Divine Spring, and which join together to become like '**rivers, which flow towards the sea of the Divine**'. Like the '**flowing water**' they would grow beyond the boundaries of one-another, with a unifying as well as liberative spirit. This is how a culture of religious harmony can evolve in to the human society.

CONCLUSION

Life is basically dynamic in its concept. It is pluralistic and multidimensional in its process. Religion is intended to cater to the spiritual dimension of human life. Different religious traditions, while remaining deeply rooted in the respective perspective and faith experience, have to be creatively related to the other religious traditions, in a spirit of dialogue. Maintaining their respective positions in the circular periphery, they have to remain surrendered to the central role of the Divine, in a humble readiness to play the second fiddle to the Divine. The humans, in a special way, have an inner dynamism towards the Divine and it functions in the co-ordination, mutuality and togetherness of the different religious paths. To be religious is to be '**inter-religious**', to be linguistic is to be '**inter-linguistic**', to be human is to be '**inter-human**' and to be spiritual is to be '**inter-spiritual**'. The rich human heritage of diverse unifying elements present in the different religious traditions is the highway to a '**culture of harmony**'. This culture of harmony will certainly usher in a '**better tomorrow**' for the 21st century and the following centuries. It will certainly facilitate a '**more human society**' to live in. It will, no doubt, accord '**a higher and a more qualitative achievement of the Divine**' in a sense of harmonious togetherness among the diverse faith perspectives of our planet.

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