

HARMONY AMONG RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

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Introduction

A coin has two sides. Both sides have an equal share in making the coin. They cannot be separated from each other. They are not contradictory to each other, either. They are complementary to each other. That is to say, one completes the other. Together, they communicate a complete idea of the coin.

In a similar fashion, there are both positive and negative impressions and perceptions in philosophical discussions. Both together compose the reality of life. One who wants to stress the positive side starts with the negative side. One who is negative in his or her perception starts with the positives. The 'but' placed in between marks the point of deviation.

As regards the point under discussion today, I opt for starting with the negative shades of religion and travel towards its core positives. The negatives of religion are those tendencies that either directly disturb or are not oriented towards the internal harmony and the external balance religion is expected to maintain. The negative beginning of the discussion on religion doesn't mean a note of pessimism, in any way.

1. Is Religion a Liability?

Karl Marx, the famous German philosopher, economist of the 19th century, notes, 'Religion is the opium of the people'¹ (Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions.). The over-sensitive and uncritical character of religion, especially in India, proves that Marx is right, to a great extent. Religion is 'highly inflammable', like petrol and diesel, in many contexts. It is over-reactive, like the bush 'touch-me-not'. It often makes people a victim of fatalistic habits, superstitions and rituals. The credulous practices and pet attachments enslave people more than liberate them. Religion is mostly a 'bhedchaal' (sheep-way) and a 'bheedchaal' (crowd-way), for millions of people. Lots of people understand their religious allegiance in a communal sense, as well.

Besides, much of religion is nothing beyond 'personality cult' and is under the clutches of self-appointed gods and goddesses. On clearer terms, it is highly hijacked by political and economic drives of power and money. It divides more and unites less. It carries a heavy baggage of negative history, either by way of commission or omission, in terms of the miseries of the world. Religion entertains lots of pathological cases. Predominantly so, it plays with extremes, either emotional or rational. Stagnant, exclusive, absolute, conservative and fanatic understandings seem to dominate in it. Much of religion is an outcrop of the VIP complex of its heads, who are craving for privileges, in the disguise of superlative titles and comic dresses. On the whole, life is highly burdened by the unnatural language and dehumanizing ways of religion. It cannot be denied that religion, especially in India, is very much a liability, than a blessing for the human society. But, throwing the 'baby with the bathtub' is not the solution of the problem. Religion requires being revisited, in view of bringing to light its positive rationale and ethical fibre.

2. Religion and its Basis Form

The word 'religion' comes from the Latin word 'religio', the verb form of which is 'religare', which means 'to bind' or 'to place an obligation on', as per the World Book Dictionary. In this sense, the word means 'obligation' or 'duty', which would denote 'a thing to be done or the right thing to be done'. Another meaning of the word 'religion' from the Latin root 'religare' means 'to bind or connect

again'. It indicates 'getting related to the divine and to the human'. In either sense, 'religion' means 'one's affiliation to the Creator and to fellow human beings and the entire creation, as a mark of one's basic duty in life. Obviously, the essential meaning of religion does not suggest any particular religious tradition and so is secular. In other words, the word 'religion' has no religion. It refers to the 'all-embracing' perspective of interfaith relations.

3. Dharma and its Core Implications

The Sanskrit word 'dharma' means 'dhaaran karna', the inner meaning of which is 'to receive, to own and to feel responsible for'. Dharma refers to 'the duty one has to perform'. It means 'conscience', which is the seat of one's self-direction', too. Dharma denotes also 'nature', which is the sum and substance of any self. 'To feel bound by one's conscience and to feel responsible for one's life and that of others' is the core logic of life. In sum, dharma stands for 'right conduct' or 'right way of living'. Again, in spite of the fact that the term 'dharma' evolved from a different linguistic and cultural background, its basic meaning agrees very much with that of religion and applies to people of all persuasions of faith.

4. Faith and its Innermost Spirit

The word 'faith' derives from the old French term 'feid' and 'foi', which means 'faith, belief, trust, confidence and pledge'. As per another etymological tradition, the word 'faith' comes from the Latin 'fides' that means 'trust, faith, confidence, reliance and belief'. The Latin verb 'fidere' also suggests meaning 'to trust'. The basic connotations observably apply to general life situations and are secular as well as are common to all traditions. Therefore, faith has to be understood in an applied sense, applied to human lives. Faith in God and faith in human beings cannot be polarized in any way. They are joined together as two sides of the same coin. Faith in the humans reflects faith in the divine, and vice versa, one mirroring the other, as well. Faith is synonym to life or to the best of life, as well as the core meanings of religion and dharma.

5. Secular Perspective of Religion

Henry Miller, an American Writer, states 'one's destination is not a place, but a new way of looking at things'². One needs to re-understand religion from a secular angle. The word 'secular' means 'that which is not connected to religious or spiritual matters'. This is a definition that applies to cultures or countries where only one system of religion exists. In a country like India, where people in general have intimate affiliation to religious traditions, to be detached from religious sentiments is not a realistic idea. Besides, in the context of varied religious traditions existing for hundreds of centuries, being connected to one or none of them wouldn't agree to sound logic, either. In the Indian setting, the meaning of 'secularism' cannot be one that excludes religion from the public sphere, in order to be made a private affair. Secularism, as per the Constitution of India, is an 'all-inclusive perspective' that is capable of imbibing the spirit and values of all traditions of faith and ideology that are present in India, whether Indic or non-Indic in origin. Religion needs to be redeemed from the ghettos, in favour of an all-embracing manner of being secular.

6. What is Our Identity?

Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, an American pastor, activist and humanitarian, in a Christmas Sermon in 1967 on 'Peace', underscored the interrelatedness of life thus, 'All life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied together into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality... this is its interrelated quality'³. Our identity as human beings has to be understood from this angle. Our identity is a three-layer concept. At the first level, it is a way of understanding oneself as an individual being. That is an 'individual identity'. At the second level, it is

a way of understanding oneself as member of a family, a community, a nation or the larger society. That is the 'social identity' or 'shared identity'. At the third level, it is a way of understanding oneself across the boundaries or above the explicit identities. That is the 'spiritual identity', which, in fact, is an 'identity beyond all identities'. These identities are progressively inclusive and qualitative in character in the ever-emerging process of growth in life. The prayer of St Francis of Assisi, obviously, belongs to the third and the highest level. It is a rare model for the way one could think larger and live one's identity in life, too. When one is set on one's journey towards human adulthood and spiritual attainment, is it too high to aspire to imbibe the spirit of the sublime identity Francis of Assisi presents? I do not think so.

7. Life is the Centre

Jesus exhorts, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath'⁴. 'Sabbath' symbolizes religion. 'Religion is made for the human being, not human being for religion'. For example, adjusting the coat to the body makes sense. But cutting the limbs to suit a certain ready-made coat does not. Religion is at the service of the human being and it cannot be otherwise. Human being is the focal point. Everything else is secondary. Similarly, religion matters, not so much this religion or that religion. Life is Creator's gift and that has to be the centre of religion. Religion in no way can occupy the central place in life. Therefore, living or dying for one's religion or faith is a radical disorientation or an abnormality. Enhancing the quality of life and nourishing it with deeper and larger meanings is the sole function of religion.

8. Religion is the Motivating Force

George Bernard Shaw, Irish playwright and a co-founder of the London School of Economics, observes, in his play 'Getting Married', 'Religion is a great force: the only real motive force in the world'⁵. By these words, he is not subscribing to a system of either myths and beliefs or rituals and practices. He refers to the influence religion is supposed to exert on the way one thinks, speaks and behaves. He implies purposefulness as the sum and substance of life. He highlights the source of one's perspectives, experiences, attitudes and approaches, too. He means 'religion is the motivating force'; it is 'the source of strength'. He also underlines genuineness as the result of the religious phenomenon in life. In this sense, religion is the foundational reality in life; it is the 'powerhouse of life'. The message that emerges from this is that 'one's religion or faith ought to motivate one to live values, emerge as good human beings and do good things for the society'. If religion performs this role, it is worth the while and if, at any rate, it does not, it is hardly anything more than a futile entity.

9. Diverse Perceptions of the Divine

The Rig Veda declares, 'Ekam Sat; Viprah Bahudha Vadanti'⁶, i.e., 'Truth is one; sages call it by various names'. Truth is a spiritual reality and it comes in numerous names and forms. Perceptions of the divine are as diverse as the number of human beings. There are theists who conceive a supreme power that created all things. There are also non-theists who rationalize belief in favour of a scientific temper or of a humanistic bend of mind. Further, theism has different variations, like monotheism, tri-theism, polytheism, henotheism, etc. There are also dualistic and non-dualistic perceptions of life. Some conceive the divine as male, some as female, some as male-female composite and some as neither male nor female. People understand the divine as transcendent or immanent also.

From a practical and experiential point of view, people approach the divine in the form of owner or lord, master, father or mother, brother or sister, friend, son or daughter, etc. Even when people follow the same form of the divine, they tend to emphasize different dimensions of it. There is variation in the intensity and degree of the experience, too. There is no question as regards which figure is right and which is wrong. All forms and aspects are equally valid and they make sense in their own way. This is what Bhagavat Gita exposes when it asserts, 'Whatever be the path people travel, it is my path and

it leads to me'⁷. Kenneth Leech, an Anglican priest and Christian socialist in the Anglo-Catholic tradition, advances this thought when he says, 'God is always beyond us, always future, always moving onwards, who prevents us from being enslaved to passing trends and to the present age'⁸. This insight paves the way for an innovative way of breaking new grounds and broadening the horizons as regards the idea of God and life.

10. 'Anekaantvaad'

One of the most characteristic philosophies of Jainism is 'Anekaandvaad'⁹ or 'Syaadvaad'. It means multiple viewpoint or non-absolutism and conditioned viewpoints or partial viewpoints, respectively. The word 'anekaandvaad' implies that there are 'many ends'. As a philosophy, it signifies that 'life is plural' and that there are 'diverse opinions and stances'. It also indicates that 'truth and reality can be perceived differently' and that 'no single point of view is the complete truth'. Considering a particular belief absolute does not stand to any logic. The popular story of 'an elephant and the blind men' illustrates this fact too well. Although all men were true to their experiences, due to their limited perspectives, they couldn't extend their imagination beyond what they comprehended. The infinite cannot be completely grasped in all aspects by finite human perceptions. For this reason, only the idea of a 'colloquium of viewpoints' answers the puzzle of life.

11. Religion is a Source of Harmony

Pope John Paul II opines, 'Religion should be what God intended it to be, a source of goodness, harmony and peace'¹⁰. That would amount to state that whatever that promotes goodness, harmony and peace is religion and whatever that does not advance them or blocks them is not religion. Firstly, having 'good will' towards the other is the positive disposition that is basic to life. Secondly, life has three directions -- the divine, the human and the natural. Being at 'harmony' with each of them and among them is the balance of life. Thirdly, being a 'peace-maker' is the way to inherit the filial status from God¹¹, as announced by Jesus. Religion, to be true to its purpose, has to be the abode of divine qualities as above and has to facilitate people to create divine families on earth, where the spirit of harmonious living has its sway. To ensure 'harmonious living' is the job of religion. When religion fails to do so, it falls back as a counter value that demolishes life.

12. Qualitative Approach to Religion

Mahaatma Kabir, a mystic poet, saint and social reformer of the middle ages, exclaims, 'Saadhu aisaa chaahye, jaisaa soop subhaay; Saar saar ko gahi rehye, thothaa dey udaay'¹². It means, 'a religious or wise person has to be like winnowing chaff from the grain; what is useful should be grasped and what is useless should be flown off'. One has to hold on to the essentials and discard the non-essentials and the meaningless. The capacity for discernment has to assist one to differentiate between the two. A critical approach to life is required. Religion is supposed to assist human beings for this mainstream task in life. Ramakrishna, a famous mystic of 19th century India, notes, 'all scriptures contain a mixture of sand and sugar; we need to take out the sugar and leave the sand behind'¹³. Religion is a mixture of essentials and nonessentials. We should extract the essence of religion and hold on to that only.

Besides, truth comes filtered through the limited human mind; it lives in a particular culture; it has its own experience of the world and it lives at a particular point in history. It needs to be assessed and discerned. 'Honeybee' is an inspiring model for imbibing the core of life. It goes to thousands of flowers and collects the sap of essence from them. No wonder, there is no comparison to the honey it prepares out of the ingredients collected from various types of flowers. A pilgrim of faith has to own such an attitude of 'imbibing quality' from all sources. Should one live a qualitative life on earth, interaction with persons of other affiliations of faith, including non-theistic ideologies, has to be the right approach to the journey of faith. Quality, and not quantity, has to guide the destinies of life.

13. 'To be Human' is the Ultimate Value of Life

Sri Narayan Guru, a Hindu saint, poet, philosopher and social reformer of India, exclaims, 'whatever be the religion, let man be virtuous'¹⁴. He has no objection to anyone being a follower of this or that religion. But he is concerned about the result it is supposed to produce for life. Negotiations as regards the so called superior-inferior or the right and wrong positions are a futile endeavour. Discriminating human beings in terms of their affiliation is a trivial pre-occupation, too. 'Being a good human being', i.e., being upright, honest and humane, is what really matters. If one does not become a good human being, what is the utility of pursuing a religious tradition in life? If then, those who declare themselves to be non-theistic are better, because of their being honest to themselves. A good human being, in fact, is religious, in the real sense of the word. To be 'fully human' would mean being 'fully spiritual' and 'fully divine', as well. Spirit is the form of the divine, a spark of which is present in every human being. Following the promptings of the Spirit within is what is meant by 'being spiritual'. Living according to the dictates of one's conscience is its practical side. Such an exercise contributes to being a good human being and is indeed meritorious. 'To be human' is the ultimate value of life.

14. Commonalities in Religions

Pope John XXIII says, 'We have to look at what unites people rather than what divides them'¹⁵. Obviously, amid the various differences that exist among traditions, it is not easy to look for uniting elements among people. It is not easy to build caring relationships, even with family members, friends, co-workers, members of one's own faith. Establishing warm relations with persons of other affiliations of faith and culture is not very easy, either. Seeing things from others' points of view is indeed a difficult job. All the same, what matters in life is that, in spite of the differences and varying viewpoints among people of diverse faiths, customs and communities, there is something truly deep that connects us all to each other as members of one big family. The different religious traditions are like a 'mirror' to each other, which facilitates seeing oneself in the other as one is. The mirror will definitely reflect the same spirit at the core. Besides, knowing the other is necessary for deepening one's own self-understanding. The foundational logic is 'the spirit is one and spirituality is one, as well. The diverse perceptions of faith are only different dimensions of the same spiritual search. They do not contradict each other, but are mutually inter-connected, inclusive, complementary and enriching.

Moreover, religious traditions are the gift of the same Creator. They are the common cultural heritage of the human society. They can in no way be divided as the private property of the respective community that professes it. Besides, all individuals and communities have a common origin, a shared existence and a common destiny. Religion is the way human beings try to get connected to the divine and find meaning in life. It is the same divine spirit the humans are experiencing, as they pursue the journey of life. Religion is a common indicator in life. It serves as the foundation of one's vision and mission in life, irrespective of the different affiliations. Religion in its core is a common phenomenon of the humans. They are like different streams, which take their origin from different sources and in different places, get mingled with each other in the ocean.

15. 'Religion' of Universal Values

Zoroastrian religion presents a three-fold ethic 'Humata, Hukhta, Huvarshta'¹⁶, i.e., 'good thoughts, good words and good deeds', as its seminal mantra. This is the simplest form of religion and could be accepted as the sum and substance of all religions. The values of 'love, service, forgiveness, freedom and equality' that emerge from the Christian tradition as well as the values of 'brotherhood and peace' advocated by Islam articulate the above mantra. The Shinto value of 'harmony of opposites' and the Baha'i value of 'unity of faiths' advance this ethic further. The values of 'nonviolence' of Jainism and the 'middle path' of Buddhism amply enrich the above ethical code. The Jewish value of 'making the world better by making people better' and the Hindu value of 'Nishkaamkarma'¹⁷ and the Upanishad

vision 'Sarve bhavantu sukhinah'¹⁸ add to the treasure of universal values immensely. These universal values are one and the same as human and spiritual values and they, in a collective form, are a religion of universal values in its essential character.

16. Harmony Perspective of Life

The word 'harmony' means integration, co-ordination, unity, balance, etc. The Hindi synonym for the same 'samanvay' has two parts, 'anvay' and 'sam'. 'Anvay' means 'agreement, co-ordination', etc. and 'sam' means 'on equal footing' or 'equally' and 'totally'. Samanvay implies a five 'S' formula: sadbhaav (good will), sambhaav (equal footing), sammaan (respect), sehyog (co-operation) and samanvay (harmony). All the meanings of harmony together compose a complete perspective of life.

The word 'harmony' is grounded in the world of music. It is the 'pleasing effect' that emerges from a group of musical sounds as they are sounded all together. A single note cannot produce harmony. The concord among many notes does. Solo players conduct themselves in such a way in the orchestra that make a single musical effect and as a result creates fine and sublime sentiments. It is the co-ordination of melody and rhythm. Singing, playing and dancing present a complete music and present a model for perfect harmony.

In the larger setting, harmony is a 'pleasant blend of diverse elements of life in a single whole'. It is an agreement between perceptions, ideas, opinions, feelings, attitudes and actions. It is an arrangement of interests and tastes, colours and shapes, traditions and practices, streams and strands, etc. It is a sense of order in the entire universe. It is the logic of proportion. It is an album of related things that agree with each other. It is a variety of parts that co-operate or work together for a common purpose and with mutual benefit. The different parts function with an equality of importance and a unity of purpose.

Daadoo Dayaal, a Saint and social reformer from Gujarat, India, presents a comprehensive picture of life in his lines, 'Dadoo pooran Brahm bichaariye, tav sakal aatmaa ek; Kaayaa kaa gun deshiye, tav naanaa baran anek'¹⁹. He rules out a fixation with the body that stresses on being many and different; he urges conceiving the complete God that makes all souls to feel united with each other. Harmony is a holistic outlook. Wholeness is beauty. When the components are fitted together well, there is a sense of completion. It brings different aspects together in mutual association. It establishes a process of continuous sharing of existence and meaning between the given elements. It is the dynamism of 'many in relation to one' as well as 'one in relation to many'. Harmony would mean an integration of the varied dimensions of creation as well as human society.

17. Interactive Approach to Religions and Cultures

Hans Kung, Professor of Ecumenical Theology and President of the Foundation for a Global Ethic, puts dialogue in the focal point when he states, 'There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions'²⁰.

The word 'dialogue' derives from the old French 'dialoge', from Latin 'dialogus' and the Greek 'dialogesthai', meaning 'converse' or 'speak' and 'across', 'with', 'through', 'between', 'among', etc., respectively. It is conversation between two or more. It is an exchange of ideas, views and experiences. It is an interaction on equal footing. Dialogue involves both speaking and listening. It would mean 'being present to the other', being a mirror to the other. It is a means to purify, enrich and transform the other. As an exercise of meeting the other face-to-face, it is a process of deep socialization. It would imply 'walking and working together' in life. Dialogue is a non-dominating style of life. It is a 'relational approach' to life.

Dialogue or interaction is the way to harmony. It necessitates one to open up to the other. It is not just a conversation but a positive attitude of goodwill towards the other. It involves learning from the other, respecting, loving, serving and promoting the other. It is a combination of give and take; it is both question and answer, in a single unit. Dialogue would mean mutual relations, mutual conversion and mutual transformation. It is a co-journey of life, a joint pilgrimage to God. It is a related existence. It would mean having a 'shared' language, a shared ideology, a shared culture, a shared commitment, a shared faith, a shared conviction and a shared spirituality.

Besides, dialogue is a 'democratic' concept of life. It implies a brotherly-sisterly and friendly style of life, in relation to one another. It is a spiritual approach to life. It is a humble way of life, in the sense that it refrains from all sorts of encroachment of the other. It maintains an aesthetic view of life, by taking fine care of the reality of diversity in life. It attends to the singularity of each dimension and attempts mutuality for enrichment and for an integrated growth. Dialogue ends in harmony and harmony begins with dialogue. In other words, dialogue leads to harmony; harmony precedes dialogue, and both are complementary, too. Dialogue is an 'inclusive, interactive, participatory, collaborative, cooperative, constructive and positive process of life'.

18. Spirit of Togetherness among Religions

There is a lyric written by Yoko Ono, a Japanese artist and peace activist, and made famous by John Lennon, an English musician, singer and songwriter, 'A dream you dream alone is only a dream; a dream you dream together is reality'²¹. Human being is both an individual and social entity. The individual being becomes more and more of a social being in the process of growing up. The more grown up one is, the more social being one is. 'Alone' is the symbol of remaining an individual and 'together' is the symbol of joining another. By going alone, though may be easier and faster, one would fly only in an imaginary world. By going together, though may be difficult and slow, a real world is sure to follow.

Moreover, religious traditions are like 'many parts in one body'²² that are of equal importance. They are like 'many branches of one tree' that are related to one another while being grounded in the same earth. They are like a 'round table', where all face each other and no one has any inherited importance. Again, they are like the 'rainbow', in which various colours and shades of colours exist collectively and compose an integrated whole. No wonder, it radiates a beauty that is par excellence. 'Spirit of togetherness' among religious traditions makes the individual religions meaningful. Martin Luther King Jr in his speech at St Louis Missouri commented, 'we must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools'²³. 'Togetherness among faiths' decides their own destiny. The universal dictum 'united we stand, divided we fall' speaks volumes.

19. Difference is an Enriching Factor

Paul Valery, a French poet, essayist and philosopher, affirms, 'We are enriched by our reciprocate differences'²⁴. Diversity has two traits in it -- 'being different' and 'being many'. 'Many' refers to the numerical status of the reality and serves the milieu required for being different. 'Difference', in reality, is the hallmark of existence. It is strange that difference causes repulsion and dissention to many people. As a matter of fact, difference motivates attraction and inter-mingling. Gender is the clearest example for a demarcated difference, as per the design of the Creator. Gender-related realities are full of qualities of 'complementary' drives, while their singularities remain intact. 'Heterogeneous qualities are enriching factors', far more than homogeneous traits. The reality of gender, and all that goes with it, provides with more than ample motivating lessons for situating the relatively minor differences in social life. Difference is not a problem to be managed, but is a positive reality to be consciously engaged with and learned from.

20. Collective Religious Sense

Mahatma Gandhi, father of the Indian nation, states, ‘the essence of all religions is one, only their approaches are different’²⁵. This is an elevated point of view that can inspire India to have a larger and comprehensive outlook to the phenomenon of religion in India, without discriminating among the individual traditions. India has a religious presence that is largely diverse. The mainstream religious tradition in India is the Vedic religion that springs forth basically from the non-Indian Aryan civilization. This is called ‘Hindu’ by mistake, because the word stood for only a geographical and cultural connotation, that too, emerging from the river Sindhu. Pre-Dravidians or Adivasis or Scheduled Tribes’, who are the original inhabitants of India’, had ‘primordial belief systems of animism, totemic perception and nature worship’. Religions of Indic and non-Indic origin contributed alike to the making of what India today is. The current religious world of India includes the Jain, the Buddhist, the Jewish, the Christian, the Muslim, the Zoroastrian, the Sikh and the Baha’i religious traditions, in addition to the Vedic. The Confucian, Shinto and Tao ideologies and the new religious movements that keep mushrooming from all traditions also are part of the religious presence. The ‘religious presence’ in India today is a ‘collective’ one and it encompasses all streams of faiths and ideologies.

21. Having Multiple Identities

Oscar Wilde, an Irish writer and poet, notes, ‘Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation’²⁶. This insight unfolds the myth and mystery of one’s sacrosanct and even un-negotiable identity. Life is multi-faceted and it has lots of aspects. There are countless roles to be played in life. Every role accords a different identity. For that matter, one has many identities in life and not just one. ‘Having multiple identities’ is the intrinsic moral fibre of the humans. Life is multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-ideological. These identities crisscross the limits of individuals and communities. Many identities co-exist and they have to exist together. One is a son/daughter, a brother/sister, a father/mother, a teacher, a linguist, a speaker, a writer, a social reformer, a Hindu/Christian at the same time. One can also belong to different faiths, speak different languages and enjoy different tastes of food, though in a more or less fashion. These identities are not contradictory, but they complement each other. India has countless options for being multiple. One has to get to know the genius of all identities, interact with all entities and imbibe the spirit of all traditions. Multiple identities compose the true identity of human beings.

22. Harmonizing One and Many

‘Is the world one or many?’²⁷ This is an ancient philosophical question. Ji Zhang, Professor of Theology, University of Melbourne, revisits this question from the modern perspective of comparative studies. Harmony of religions requires of diving deep into the spiritual tradition one has inherited or chosen. Harmony doesn’t mean remaining in ‘no man’s land’. That would contradict the very idea of harmony, too. For instance, in order to ‘dig a well’, one has to discern and choose a certain location and keep digging until one gets water. Digging a bunch of shallow holes does not do any good. Similarly, if a ‘tree’ is not firmly grounded in the earth, it cannot stand the ground. It is sure to wither and fall away. ‘Touching the roots of one’s tradition’ is necessary for producing fruit as well as for being rooted in the ground. Shallowness can cause missing God-experience, which is available only to those who surpass the surfaces. Until this goal is achieved, one has to pursue the line. Harmonizing one and many with regard to the diverse traditions of faith, first and foremost, requires delving deep into oneself. Getting related to the other or many emerges from this. Such a harmonizing could be worded thus, ‘one is mine in special and others are mine in general’.

Harmonizing one and many would involve individuals, families, institutions, communities, nations and the entire society. The test doze for this exercise would be the question ‘whom do we call a human being?’ Who is a befitting answer to this tricky question – a white or a black, a

high caste or a low caste, a man or a woman, a theist or an atheist, a literate or an illiterate, a poor or a rich, a young or an old? Every human being on the planet is unique and is a new edition of the human nature, in diverse aspects. Establishing personal friendship with persons of other backgrounds and affiliations, organizing neighbourhood gatherings, inter-community gatherings, inter-community get together and common celebration of festivals are some of the ways in which the mission of harmonizing one and many could be fostered.

23. Making a more harmonious society

Lord Robert Baden Powell (1857-1941), a lieutenant-general in the British Army, writer, and founder of the Scout Movement, made his 'Last Message', as a parting word of goodbye. He seems to have been motivated by the play 'Peter Pan', in which the pirate chief was making his dying speech. The message is this -- 'Leave this world a little better than you found it'²⁸. Once I have seen this highly motivating message, applied to the most grass root context of a toilet. The caption read, 'Leave the place better than you found it'. This is in fact what Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the most famous American English Poet of the 20th century, stresses in his poem 'A Psalm of Life', 'But to act, that each to-morrow finds us farther than to-day'²⁹. Could one contribute one's mite to make the society of one's belonging a little more transformed? Could we rise above our ethnic and cultural backgrounds to join hands with each other to build bridges of understanding, friendship and fellowship? Could we ensure making strides in our journey of life in order to find us progressing always? When we are united, we travel and advance; when we are divided, we get stagnant and stuck up. Mahatma Gandhi suggested personal transformation to precede social transformation: 'If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change'³⁰. These words stand as a lighthouse to guide our way, in view of leading the society towards a 'little better', 'farther' and 'more harmonious'. That is the sacred social environment that is worthy of the human society; that is the real heaven the human species is pining to have its being in, especially in the third millennium.

END NOTES

1. Karl Marx, Introduction to the proposed work 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right in Journal 'Deutsch Franzosische Jahrbucher', Paris, 7 and 8 February, 1844
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