

IN SEARCH OF UNIVERSAL VALUES

Dr M.D. Thomas

1. Religion – a Critique

The world history is a living witness to the plain fact that religion has played a significant role in maintaining the balance of social life as well as in civilizing human beings. In spite of the drastic changes that have taken place in the religious sector or in matters affecting religion, religion still remains a major force in the history of the humans. It seems to remain a refining force, ahead as well, in some way or other.

Nevertheless, in considerable cases, especially in India, religion appears to do to people what it is not supposed to. For the vast majority of the religionists, religion doesn't seem to be anything more than what Karl Marx said, 'an opium of the people'. It makes them flare up, as petrol and diesel, which is 'highly inflammable'. It makes them over-reactive, like the bush 'touch-me-not'. It habituates them to be unsociable with people of other religious affiliations, in terms of biased theories of right and wrong or higher and lower.

Besides, religion for most people is a ladder to climb up to one's private heaven. They understand religion as a self-centred engagement. They are blind-folded as regards its barefaced social commitments. Entertaining themselves with a package of empty myths, stories, rituals and superstitions seems to fill their hearts. The deep-seated habits produce little or no ethical fruit for social life. 'How far such an infertile system of religion can contribute to human uplift?' This is a fundamental question to be explored.

Jesus lived in a time when the religious heads understood Sabbath, the seventh day, to be a day totally devoted to God, so much so that even doing a good deed was objectionable. No wonder, Jesus had to intervene and batter the belief, saying 'Sabbath was made for man (human being) and not man (human being) for the Sabbath' (Mk 2.27). Placing religion in the place of Sabbath, one is forced to realize that religion is made for the human being and it cannot be otherwise. Does adjusting the human body to the ready-made coat make any sense? If it does not, regulating one's self to the fallacious stipulations of religion can only be as absurd as that.

As a matter of fact, we find a high percentage of people ready to die for the religion they profess, leave aside living for the religion. They are like the horse that is blindfolded on the sides, so that the contractors of religion can easily control them. Domesticated to highly submissive habits through concocted theories, people tend to slip into a cult of personality. No wonder, the religious conditioning makes people unreflective, fundamentalist and fanatic in their so called beliefs. Manifestly, this is a clear disorientation in life.

To be honest, religion is not the centre of life, in spite of the fact that religion is very much a great gift of God. To be clearer, religion is man-made, while it is granted that it is endowed with the inspiration of the Spirit. Life is the central and most valuable gift of God and there cannot be any parallel to it. Religion is at the service of life. For that matter, religion has to be always life-oriented and life-promoting. Whenever it knocks life down or makes it stagnant, it is diabolic and is a real enemy to life.

The critical realization religionists in particular and the human world in general requires is that life is God's gift and it is not religious. No religious system can make an absolute claim on it or impose upon it its own definition. There is no debating the fact that faith is good and is essentially vital to life. But, blind faith is fundamentally detrimental to life. Only an enlightened faith can do any good to human beings in the process of fathoming the niceties of life. The least that can be said at this juncture is that a new way of perceiving religion and its function is what is necessary for making a meaningful life.

2. Diverse Perceptions of the Divine

The logic of common sense, coupled with one's experience, is more than enough base for affirming the existence of a divine power above and within every being. But, the way one perceives and experiences that power or force is too diverse that it cannot be reduced to a single frame. All approaches have their own relevant and rightful space in this world. Recognizing the freedom of the other to hold on to his or her own point of view is the license for everyone to enjoy one's own space.

Theists profess the reality of a divine power, whereas some strongly differ from them, placing a claim on being non-theists. I suppose the non-theists have their own way of recognizing a higher reality in life. Some theists observe God as one, whereas some consider it in many forms. Some traditions hold it as one-in-three or three-in-one and some, as thirty-three crores. Perhaps, it is better to state that there are as many forms of God as there are human beings.

Further, some religious traditions consider God male, some female, some, a composite form of male and female and some, neither male and nor female. The diversity in the perception of God applies to an experience of God as father, mother, master, owner, husband, wife, brother, sister, friend, guest, stranger, and the like. Even when two persons, let them be male and female or male and male or female and female, experience God, for instance, as father or mother, the dimension and degree of their experience is beyond the scope of comparison.

Kenneth Leech, a great religious thinker, makes an insightful observation when he states, 'God is always ahead of us'. To figure out the face of God, one needs to go ahead of God. Since this is an utterly impossible job, one has to satisfy one's self with the knowledge of God one gathers by being close to God, at one's best. Given the subjective character of such a divine experience, what is important is to grant the legitimacy of diversity with regard to the perceptions of God. What the visionary Sai Baba declared 'sab kaa maalik ek' (there is but one master (God) for all) summarizes the debate regarding the rightness of the definition or narrative of God.

3. One Faith and Many Dimensions of Faith

Spirit is the supernatural principle of life. It is the self-sustained and never-dying essence that gives meaning to life, beyond time and space. It is the animating nucleus that characterizes every living being. With such an all-encompassing character, spirit can never be many. Spirit is just one, but has various dimensions. The divine spirit is common to all living beings, but there is an autonomous particle of that spirit in every human being. That amounts to say that 'spirit is one and many', at the same time.

Faith would mean being grounded in the spirit, the spirit abiding in human beings and the universe as well as in the spirit that is beyond everyone. That makes it clear that faith and spirit are complementary to each other. Both faith and spirit have three variations – in one's self, in the other and above everyone. All these variations of both spirit and faith are common denominators for all human beings, irrespective of affiliations to different traditions. These common indicators pave the way for bridging the gap between the most blatant phenomenon of 'one and many' in life.

Diverse religious traditions emerged in the history of the human world at different times and contexts. Noticeably, they are not the monopoly of the respective times or contexts. They are the gifts of the same divine spirit and are the common cultural heritage of the human society. They cannot and should not be claimed by the custodians or followers of the respective particular traditions as private property. That would amount to be a massive crime against religion, humanity and God, all at the same time. Religious traditions have to refrain from such a massive crime, by learning a lesson from essential synchronization present in 'one body and many parts' of the human being.

4. Implications of Being Inter-Religious

The Hindi film 'Chak de India' strikes an impressive note on 'the spirit of being a team', in order to win any game. Playing for the country, and not for the state, is more important for winning a world hockey game. That would necessitate rising above the boundaries of one's language, state, culture, and the like. Applying this message to the entire spectrum of religions, it has to be underlined that being a member of this religion or the other is less important. It is only a pedestal for flying to broader horizons. Being 'inter-religious', by way of being and of collaborating, is more worth the while.

Now, the question arises as to how one could be inter-religious. No believer can be in a 'no man's land'. It is not expected of anyone, either. For instance, the normal form of human being is either male or female. But both have to rise to a higher level of imbibing the human characteristics present in either of them. To be inter-religious would mean, first and foremost, being rooted in one's own faith-tradition. But, that is not enough for an adult believer. He or she has to get related to other traditions of faith. He or she has not only to be informed of the basics of the other's faith, but has to learn and absorb the universal values that are inherent in them. In fact, this is a hard job, but this is, in fact, the test of one's being religious in one's own tradition.

The 'honey bee' is an amazing creature that shows the 'inter-religious way'. It gathers floral essence from hundreds of flowers, not only of one category of flowers but of a wide variety of them, as they come on the way. No wonder, the processed honey it holds in its hive defeats all comparison to anything in the world. It stands on its own merit. Young and old as well as sick and healthy find it medicinal at all times, curative or preventive. So is the inter-religious way. Believers have to take inspiration from the honey bee for becoming inter-religious by way of imbibing the great qualities and values God has spread all over the earth.

Sri Narayan Guru of Kerala, a great philosopher, poet, saint and revolutionary, strikes the keynote of life, when he says 'majhab ho koi bhee, insaan bhalaa so bhalaa' (whatever be your religion, it suffices if you are a good human being). If one is not a good human being, no religious belonging would stand the test of life. One has to make the best of one's own tradition of faith, in order to culture one's own self for being 'humane'. The universal values in other traditions of faith will certainly add colour to becoming a more complete human being. Becoming a good human being is the ultimate objective of having a faith.

Lord Robert Powell, Lieutenant-General in the British Army, writer and founder of the Scout Movement, made his 'Last Message' in these words, 'leave this world a little better than you found it'. Could we make our family, neighbourhood, our community, our country and our society a little better than we have found it? That is the radical question that is posed to us as believers, of one tradition or the other. Does our faith 'motivate' us to work for the other, for lifting the morale of the demoralized? Could we join hands with each other for re-instating the fundamental human dignity of the lost and the least around us?

The words of Mahatma Gandhi will assist us in finding a responsible answer to the above questions, 'if we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change'. Nelson Mandela, the world leader who facilitated human dignity to be back on the track, through his unparalleled struggle of the black against the white, adds fuel to the fire of 'change', when he says, 'revolution starts from the self, within the self'. If our 'spiritual and ethical fibre' gets boosted up by these giant human role models, it is an irrefutable proof that faith in God is capable of liberating us from our shackles. It will be a testimony that being religious is meaningful because it makes us inter-religious, like the 'branches of the same tree' of life. 'Peace' is the 'grand finale' of such a 'socially-applied and inter-religious' style of life.

Dr M.D. Thomas

Founder Director, Institute of Harmony and Peace Studies
Floor 1, A 128, Sector 19, Dwarka, New Delhi 110075

Tel.: 09810535378 (p), 08847925378 (p), 011-45575378 (o)
Email: mdthomas53@gmail.com (p), ihps2014@gmail.com (o)
Website: www.mdthomas.in (p), www.ihpsindia.org (o)

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/mdthomas53>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mdthomas53>

Academia.edu: <https://independent.academia.edu/MDTHOMAS>