

PLACES OF WORSHIP OF RELIGIONS

Dr M.D. Thomas

Is God present in this world? Theists would be excited to give an answer in the affirmative. But, non-theists would even hesitate to answer such a question that does not make sense to them. If insisted, some of them certainly would come up with clear-cut ‘no’, while others might say firmly ‘definitely not for us!’ Such an answer without doubt would embarrass the questioner. It should provoke the questioner to examine and revise his or her conception of God, which is perhaps the real cause of difference of opinion as regards the existence of God in this world. The word ‘atheism’ developed in contrast to the word ‘theism’. If ‘theism’ was not rightly conceived and delivered, ‘atheism’ is bound to emerge. ‘Action and reaction’ share foundational traits in common. The real point of contention as regards the existence of God seems to be in the worldviews, concepts, understandings, interpretations, implications, etc. that diverse religious traditions entertain, and not exactly in the logic of the possibility or even the reality of a ‘power that is ever higher’ to the entire creation. The idea of ‘the divine’ needs to be re-conceived so as to suit the pluralistic and multi-dimensional mode of earthly existence. Much of the divine deserves to be left undefined and open-ended in a humble and serene spirit of ‘neti-neti’ (not this, not this) of the Upanishads. That, I suppose, would facilitate the evolution of a comfortable answer to the question that initiated these lines.

Where is God present in this world? Could there be exclusive geographical locations that explain the divine presence? I do not think so. The whole earth is one indivisible geographical unit. The celestial power or the cosmic order cannot be geographically bound. The super-natural being is in the spiritual form and is at the core of all beings, living and even non-living. It cannot be the prerogative of a particular time, a group or a cultural convention. The human-made ‘earthly set-up’ that is intended to make the invisible visible on earth in a symbolic manner cannot, in any way, be mistaken for the ‘real’ and the ‘beyond’. The ‘mysterium tremendum’ cannot be limited or conditioned by a certain geological or ethnic entity. It is like breeze. One wouldn’t know where it comes from and where it goes to. One wouldn’t succeed deciding the destinies of its direction or boundless aura. Though may be seemingly insignificant, not even a article or a corner of the creation can afford to be out of the impression of the Creator. There is no more important or less important in the massive and bountiful arena of the divine. No being, human or other, living or non-living, can attempt to live without that essential and unattainable power above. Yes, ‘God is present everywhere’, in an equal degree and in its totality.

What do Places of Worship of Religions stand for? The human civilization has improvised religious thoughts in order to answer the philosophical queries of the human mind as regards the foundations of life as well as to assist human lives keep going meaningfully. Seers, saints and prophets emerged at different times and places and they unearthed great insights, relying on their tuning with the divine. They responded to the demands of the context, as well. Religious traditions were customized. Different communities erected shrines for the divine according to their perceptions and in tune with their ethnic and cultural notions. Temples, Churches, Synagogues, Mosques, Gurudwaras, Viharas, Ashrams and other temples or devalayas were constructed as places of worship to the respective deities. In intention, they are only provisional symbols of divine presence. They attempt to meet the same God, though they are distinctive in architectural and ritual forms. They cannot be divided into ‘mine and yours’; all of them are ‘ours’. ‘One is mine in special; others are mine in general’ – that is the relational balance among them. It is not fair for the respective religious communities to monopolize them. They are the common cultural and religious heritage of the human society. There is no contradiction between any of them. One is complementary to the other. As Kenneth Leech reminds, ‘God is always beyond’. Therefore, all of them are mere make-shift abodes of the same Creator of the entire universe. Mahatma Kabeer puts us in the right track when he says, ‘Jit dekhoon, tit toon’ (wherever I look, I see the same God). All these ‘divine images’ are places of saadhna of divine socialization. Places of worship of religions have to be power-houses of unity, harmony and peace across all human-made boundaries. Any sort of discrimination and conflict among them would be a sheer mocking of the same divine they aspire to stand for. Awakening cosmic consciousness of the divine and making a world that is more ‘humane’ and ‘harmonious’ is the sublime lesson they jointly have to teach. Could the life-journey of the human mortals be geared towards such spiritual altitude?

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