

# THE PLACE OF GOD IN SOCIETY TODAY

## A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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### INTRODUCTION

The existence of a Creative Power above the universe is, in fact, the ever-standing response to the aspiration of the humans for the same. Immense ways of celebrating the presence of that Power in the creation, especially in the human society, have been rendered possible by the diverse religious traditions of the world, which have emerged in line with the given spatio-temporal imperatives of the context. Human beings, obviously, have a privileged access to the experience and understanding of that Supreme Power. A vast majority of the human society clearly perceive and accept that Power in the context of any one of such religious tradition or ideology. Others hold on to something or other as supreme, in a pragmatic fashion. The *raison de'tre* of the primary place of God in the human society thus is a matter of simple logic. But, assessing the real place of God in the society has many angles, that too, from a Christian perspective. The quality of the presence of the divine in the religious practices is the first angle. The second should be the reflection of the presence of God in the non-religious sectors of service. The third would be an analysis of the implications of the negative or irreligious tendencies in the society, which seriously challenge the presence of God. The setting of the analysis is the purview of the different dimensions of the context of the phenomenon as well as of the phenomenon of religion itself.

### 1. THE CONTEXT OF THE PHENOMENON

#### 1.1. The global scenario

*The modern day human culture* characterize the global scenario today, in all its dimensions. The scientific mentality, especially of the west, has wrought deep-seated changes in the world human society. The progress of technology is now re-shaping the face of the earth. The committed attempt at the conquest of space has far-reaching implications. The human mind is broadening its mastery over time—over the past through the insights of history, over the present through sustained enterprises for extending the spheres of life and over the future by foresight and planning. Advances in biology, psychology and social sciences lead the humans to greater self-awareness and provide them with the technical means for molding the lives of peoples. The destiny of the human race is viewed as merging into a complete whole, no longer, as it were, in the particular histories of the peoples. Mankind seems to substitute the static

concept of nature for an evolutionary, dynamic and multi-dimensional one. The consciousness of the individual identities of the peoples has necessitated the pluralistic mindset that leads to an ever-enriching spirit of harmony among them. Therefore, the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the diverse ‘gospels’ of the world becomes all the more vital.

There have been *sweeping changes in the social order*, too. The traditional structure of families, clans, tribes, communities and other groups as well as of social relationships has undergone changes. Movements like industrialization, urbanization, globalization, socialization, mass media and the fast spread of knowledge and human transport have raised a variety of challenges, in spite of the significant achievements they have secured for the human society. Change in attitudes and structures calls accepted values into question. A great portion of people seems to take a hard look at the magical world-views and superstitions, which religious traditions are accustomed to project. A more personal and active commitment of faith coupled with a lively sense of the divine is called for. A keener awareness of the existing inequalities and imbalances in the world, of the conflict between specialization and an over all view of reality as well as between the affluent and underdeveloped nations is posing newer questions.

Besides, *the play of extremes between hope and anguish* is a complex situation. There is abundance of wealth, resources and economic well being, on the one hand, and on the other, a huge section of the people of the world is plagued by hunger and extreme need. Countless numbers are still totally illiterate, while knowledge and education have advanced in immense measures. At no time the humans had such keen sense of freedom, only to be faced by new forms of slavery in thinking and living. There is a lively feeling of unity and a compelling sense of solidarity that facilitate mutual dependence, on the one hand, and a lamentable cleavage to bitter hostility and antagonism in the political, social, economic, racial and ideological areas, on the other. The growing exchange of ideas is confronted by a widespread disagreement about the meaning of the words that express our key concepts. There is a painstaking search for a better material world, without a spiritual advancement in a parallel measure. The demands of the higher being or of the voice of the human conscience require a realistic response to the above situation in the global society.

## **1.2. The Asian situation**

*Asia is a significant continent* that has approximately two thirds of the population of the world. A great variety of ethnic origins and racial characteristics of the peoples is the landmark of this continent. Almost all the religious and spiritual traditions of the world have originated in Asia. Several new spiritual and ideological streams have come up in the recent times and many are in the making, too. The highest number of

languages, ideological streams and cultures are present in this continent. There are different political systems prevailing in the countries of Asia. There are developed, developing and under-developed countries in Asia. There are diverse landscapes, climates and resources in this continent. The people of Asia are highly art-minded. Asia is greatly characterized by values of spiritual search, silence, experience, tolerance, emotional involvement, and the like. Family and community ties are perhaps the strongest here. Pluralistic mindset is the unique cultural heritage of this geographical area.

On the other hand, *there are several problems* that are staring the life-stream of Asia. Ritualism and superstitions in Asia are perhaps the highest in the world. Fundamentalist, fanatic and communal attitudes are rampant, with the consequent riots and the incalculable human suffering among the peoples, especially the innocent. A considerable percent of people are living below poverty line and are struggling to make both ends meet. Scientific attitude to life and societal development are very much lacking. Planning of the family and society for integrated growth is considerably insufficient. People in general aren't capable enough of self-dependence, freethinking and sustainable action. The Asians are too vulnerable because of the high emotional content in them. They are highly influenced by the non-Asian themes and styles; they are even manipulated by the multi-nationals, in many respects. The Asian continent is afflicted by various conflicting ideologies, even with regard to religious affiliations. Modernity and its implications have posed several problems and challenges for Asia. An honest reflection and action is the clarion call addressed to the continent.

### **1.3. The Indian context**

*Diversity is the most characteristic hallmark of Indian civilization*, although it also applies to Asia in a particular manner and to the world, in the general context. The social mosaic of India is multi-dimensional. 'Unity in diversity' as well as 'diversity in unity' is its fundamental identity, in a special sense. 'A sense of world family' is the pivotal concept that makes the multifarious streams of languages and literary strands, art forms and social mores, food tastes and dress designs, religious faiths and spiritual visions, ideologies and cultural ways as well as geographical sensibilities vibrate in a spirit of sharing the same life. The different genders, castes, classes, professions, associations and communities in India ensure different ways of belonging together. A large number of saints and sages of the land have attained unparalleled excellence in the experience of spiritual exuberance. They have left for us ever-inspiring insights for continuing societal reformation for advancing the quality of human life as well as for attaining divine radiance. Several great leaders also have left for us memorable and challenging footprints. The constitution of India has collected in it some of the most perennial values for a valuable life. Harmony perspective of the life is the integrating

principle in the Indian society at the national level. A spirit of interaction and cooperation among the diverse factors of life only can assure a meaningful social life in India. The religious and spiritual traditions have to take a lead, in a new way, i.e., a joint leadership for the making of a better society.

On the negative side, *the Indian society is surrounded by multi-sided challenges*. It has an appalling disparity between the rich and the poor as well as between the literate and the illiterate. In spite of even the superfluous religious practices, ranking regarding living the spiritual values is in general below average. Civic rules and values aren't taken seriously enough. The society is not coordinated enough with regard to its growth. Undue influence of the multi-nationals, especially the European and American tendencies, seems to destroy the cultural and spiritual genius of the country very much. Lack of planning in developing and maintaining the family upsets the equilibrium of social life. Communal rivalry and the consequent tensions in the society disturb the beauty of life, to a great extent. The religious and cultural heritage and the superb constitution do not have sufficient impact on the day-to-day life of the people. Most of the leaders are greatly self-centred and seem to have lost their sense of leadership. Market philosophy seems to run the show of life. Anti-human and anti-spiritual tendencies are rampant in the different sectors of the social life of the country. The singular land of India has to combat the unsocial elements and play a significant leadership of the world, in line with great cultural heritage of the country.

#### **1.4. The phenomenon of religion**

*Religion seems to be the most complex phenomenon in human life*. This phenomenon finds its expression in the diverse major and minor religious traditions of the world. The positive and negative dimensions of religion are reflected in all the areas of social life, in more or less degrees. This phenomenon has undergone a significant change worldwide, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is considerably a new atmosphere with regard to religion today. Incompatibility with scientific progress and the philosophy of humanism is the increasing trend in the phenomenon of religion. Great numbers are falling away from the practice of religion. There is a strong tendency to exclude God or at least to disregard his primacy or foundational importance, especially from public life. Religious thought and behaviour have taken diverse directions, much more than before. Non-religious ideologies are steadily on the increase in their influence on the day-to-day arenas of human lives. Scientific advancements as well as the spread of knowledge have dealt very rudely with certain of the mystified and sectarian tendencies. A great number of people seem to have disowned not only the traditional religions but also religion itself. The basic question today is not this religion or that religion, but religion itself. Declaring oneself to be non-religious, atheist, humanist or religion-less has become an appalling phenomenon, especially in cosmopolitan cities

including that of India. Religious traditions have to respond inescapably to the sociological implications of religion. A serious retrospection as well as introspection is called for!

### **1.5. The primary place of God and religion**

Religious traditions venture to prove that God alone can satisfy the deepest cravings of the human heart. Religion professes the primary place of the divine in life. This is inevitable for maintaining the basic order and orientation of life, in addition to the recognition of the Higher Power of the world. It is true that all religious traditions have contributed to the world human society immensely in this regard. All the same, history witnesses the staring fact that all of them, in more or less degrees, have shattered the divine presence in the human society very badly. They have caused wars and tensions, massacres and murders, violence and hatred, and the like. Exaggerated theories, exclusive interpretations, hypocritical practices and scandalous ways in religions have promoted fundamentalist, fanatic, communal and terrorist attitudes and deeds. Maintaining the basic search for the Supreme Power of the universe and thus furnishing the humans with meaning in life is a vital challenge for the religions. Religions have to rectify the paradoxical divide they have created in the human society for justifying hidden interests. They have to respond to the multi-dimensional texture of the life of today with newer ways of leadership, in order to prove their relevance. The irreligious tendencies pursued in social life by members of all affiliations need to be seriously attended to. *The divine should have its due place in human life, so that the equilibrium as well as of the meaning of life would remain intact.*

### **1.6. The Christian perspective of God**

The Christian perspective of God, obviously, derives from the vision and mission of Jesus. The vision of Jesus, in its turn, emerged from his personal experience. He experienced God as 'father' and himself as 'son'. His filial experience revealed to him the diverse implications of what it means to be a 'son' as well as of what it means to be a 'father'. This relational understanding between the divine and the human spoke volumes to him about the relation among the humans. The vertical relation needs to be translated into a horizontal relation with other human beings. His filial experience evolved into a fraternal experience. This is what he meant when he said, 'whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do it unto me'. The 'heavenly father' is like a large umbrella, under which all the human beings, and the whole creation, can gather as a family of relations, i.e., as children of the same Heavenly Father. Therefore, to love the Divine would mean to love the human beings. The human beings are the image and likeness of God. To find the divine nature reflected in the human beings is spiritual achievement, par excellence. Whatever misbehaviour against one another is

misbehaviour against God Himself. Being good to the other in thought, feelings, words and deeds is godliness. Extending loving service to the other is religion and spirituality proper, according to Jesus. *The place of God in the society needs to be analyzed from such a sociological and practical perspective of God. This is what the Christian tradition firmly upholds.*

## **2. REFLECTIONS OF THE DIVINE IN SOCIAL LIFE**

### **2.1. Religious Practices**

A large majority of people belonging to different religious persuasions practices the religious tenets very scrupulously. The general public practices the popular religious traditions very much on the sentimental level, too. This is the case with almost all the religions. Those religions that have priest-craft and ritual practices have a strong system of worshipping the divine in symbolic forms, either on the individual level or on the community level. A great number of people believe in pilgrimages and seem to act upon the same at any cost. Popular beliefs express themselves in fasts and other forms of devotion. Meditation, contemplation, retreats, yoga, namaaz, jap, and the like, are yet other devotional ways. Both the dualistic approach of bhakti and the non-dualistic approach of mysticism are accepted ways of reaching out to the divine. Non-ritual religious traditions stand for universal values, like unity, equality, development and harmony. This is the world phenomenon, with special stress on the Asian context and with very special stress on the Indian context. It could be stated without doubt that *all these religious ways highlight the primary place of God in human life in a very effective way.*

### **2.2. Saint poets of India**

One of the most outstanding achievements of the Indian society, especially of the medieval period, is the large group of saint poets. They emerged from different parts of the country, especially from among the common folk. Their poetic lines are available in the regional and national literatures. The most significant of them was Kabeer of the Hindi Literature, who have pioneered the very 'sant tradition'. Ravidas, Dadoodayal, Meeraabaayee, and the like, and Soofee saints like Jaayasee and Rajjabdaas belong to the Hindi Literature. Tukaraam, Naamdev, Eknaath and Gyaaneswar of Maharashtra, Vaamana of Andhra Pradesh, Basweshwar, Sarvagya and Purandhardaas of Karnataka, Sri Narayan Guru and Chattambiswaamikal of Kerala, Periyar and Bhaarateeyar of Tamil Nadu and Narsee Mehta of Gujarat are some of them from the other regional literatures. They were devotees or mystics, or both, of an unparalleled excellence. All of them presented a significant spiritual and social message in poetical language of their own right. They were holy men and women and they radiated the divine presence

in their lives. All of them command fairly a good following, though in more or less numbers. They are being taught in the schools, colleges and the universities of the country. Their lines are at the tip of the tongues of people, especially the general public. Their contribution to the making of a more spiritual and humane society is beyond any comparison. They were in fact incarnations of the divine, though in different degrees. *They, undoubtedly, were and are living symbols of the presence of God in the Indian society.*

### **2.3. Educational Service**

The most fundamental area where the presence of God is seen reflected according to the Christian perspective is education. Learning is fundamental to all living beings. But, education is characteristic to human culture. Human being has to develop himself or herself to the full stature intended by the Creator. This innate need to learn and get educated is his or her fundamental right. So the human society has evolved a system of education as well as language for mutual communication. To serve the human being in this capacity is basic to human life. It is indeed the noblest service to the society. Service to the process of growth towards becoming a full human being, as enshrined in the system of education, certainly reflects the divine in the society.

From this perspective, *all the formal and non-formal efforts at literacy as well as the educational institutions speak greatly of the presence of the Creative Power in the society.* In a very special way, the Christian community has been extending pioneering service in this area since centuries, especially in the recent centuries. This service has been extended to human beings, irrespective of their religious and other forms of belonging. The reality of learning and teaching is a religion by itself, which is common to people of all religious affiliations. Values of all religious traditions as well as of the civil society are promoted in the educational process. General and religious education facilitates the awareness and the capacity to rise beyond the boundaries and accept the human being as the image of God and thus to recognize the divine present in the creation as well as in him or her.

### **2.4. Medical care**

Medical care is another area where the divine can be seen clearly reflected. Both those who treat the sick and those who are sick are active icons of this medical care. Health is primary to life. Life is not possible if one is not healthy. Serving the sick is an exceptional service to life. It is beyond the purview of religious and other considerations. It goes without saying that the sick needs the physician. The creed of the Doctors and the nurses as well as that of the sick is sickness. Pro-life perspective is the basic motto that guides their steps.

*The hospitals and dispensaries of the society as well as the care and nursing of the sick are symbols of divine presence, may any community monitor them. The Christian missionaries have been great agents of tender love and care to the sick, without discrimination of any sort. The Christian medical centers derive special motivation and strength from Jesus Christ their Master. The profession of medical service is spirituality by itself. The commitment to the patients and the attempt to eliminate sickness and promote health and well-being is a clear effort at incarnating the divine in the society to fuller degrees.*

## **2.5. Service to the poor and the weaker sections**

The poor are those who are deprived of the basic financial resources that are required for the basic sustenance of life. The poor are those who struggle to make both ends meet. They are those who, for want of the necessities of life, struggle and suffer in life. They get cornered in life, in many ways. They have to depend on the mercy of the haves for their basic survival. Service to those who are poor and are thus weak and voiceless in various respects for making them self-dependent is to build up their lives. God is closer to these unfortunate brethren of the society. Jesus was the friend of the poor and the weak. Preferential option for the poor is the characteristic note of Christian life. The Christian community has been pioneering variety of schemes for the welfare of the poor. This service has been extended to people of all religions, irrespective of their ethnic, linguistic, professional and other belongings, too. Other communities and organizations are doing a great deal of service in this area as well. *All these efforts geared at a more convenient and meaningful life for the weaker sections, undoubtedly, reflects the presence of God in a special way.*

## **2.6. Special service to the handicapped**

It is really unfortunate that the human society has people who are mentally and physically handicapped. Having born into this world, they also have a right to live. They can contribute to the society in many ways and means, too. They need a special help. The service done to these unfortunate brothers and sisters of the human family is certainly a service of superior quality. The Christian community has been extending special service to the physically and mentally challenged of the society in diverse ways and means. Obviously, they are in no way discriminated on the basis of religious, linguistic, social, professional and cultural backgrounds. There are also other organizations that extend similar service. The country has hundreds of centers, which take care of such people and thousands and thousands are benefiting from such centers. Service measured out to these helpless brethren of ours is service, par excellence.



*These unfortunate brothers and sisters and the fine service done to them certainly radiate the presence of the divine in a singular manner.*

## **2.7. The exigencies of life**

The created world of ours is limited in every way. Existence of all living beings, especially of the human beings, therefore, is afflicted by several consequences of the limitations. Natural calamities, like earthquake, storm, flood, extreme winter, extreme summer, famine, epidemic and sickness, unsettle the rhythm of life. Tsunami and earthquake of the recent past could be specially mentioned. These are immense opportunities for cooperation and friendship between neighbouring countries and religious communities. Selfishness, greed and pride cause inter-personal tensions. Jealousy, violence, terrorism, murder, vested interests and chaos cause communal riots to happen. To attend to these emergency situations and their inescapable consequences is an imperative service. *The timely service to the victims of such exigencies* by the Christian and other organizations is indeed the genuine reflection of the divine in the society.

## **2.8. Harmony among Faith traditions**

*The diverse affiliations of faith in the human society* have emerged at different geographical, historical and cultural contexts. They are gifts of the same Creator. They are the common cultural heritage of the human society. Religious and other communities, especially today, cannot afford to exist like islands or travel like parallel lines. They need to inter-relate and interact with each other. Dialogue and harmony among religious communities envisages opening up towards people of other religious affiliations, in a spirit of good will, respect and collaboration, while being firmly founded in one's own faith. A deeper understanding of one's faith coupled with an ever-growing consciousness of being one family with other communities necessarily evolves into a spontaneous interaction with people of other religious traditions. While the societal texture of India gently invites us to such a noble gesture, the dire social situations challenge us towards friendly relations, too. The mission of dialogue and harmony is avowed to establishing friendly relations with persons of different faiths and to celebrating a culture of working together for a better society.

*The coming together of different religious communities in a common search for the Divine is indeed a sparkling action of the divine.* Realizing the presence of the divine in each other is essential to grow towards a universal call of salvation. Dialogue and friendship between the nations, both at formal and informal levels, have increased the scope of peace in the regional and international arenas, especially in the SAARC and Indo-Pak context. The Catholic Church has pioneered such a culture of dialogue in a

significant way, especially in the recent decades. Today other communities have several schemes for the same purpose, too. Such a noble mission of networking the individuals and communities and thus making a harmonious society reflects the presence of the divine in a great way. Such harmony perspective of life proves the great spiritual character of Asia and India and assures a much brighter future for the whole world.

### **3. CHALLENGES TO THE PRESENCE OF GOD**

#### **3.1. Fundamentalist tendencies in religions**

It is true that the modern world has in it a variety of elements that unite the human society, like globalization, technological development and transport facilities. There are a series of noble efforts at dialogue and harmony monitored by different religious and social sectors, too. All the same, there is a strong urge in the individuals and communities to separate from one another. There is a lot of ghetto-mindedness. There is a great deal of fundamentalist thinking in the religious sector. To be rooted in the fundamentals is a foundational necessity. But to be attached to the fundamentals is to get stuck up and to be stunted in growth. Selfishness, sense of security, inability to be in the swim and stagnation in the mind are some of the reasons for this sad phenomenon. Consequently, one's mind grows resentful and fanatic. One gets addicted to certain rituals of one's tradition and lands up in a communal frame of mind. It is as if 'the human being is made for the Sabbath (religion)'. He gets enslaved in a spiritless system. In such a sad predicament religion almost dies, spirituality doesn't get rooted. Therefore, *the fundamentalist religious practices do not radiate the presence of God*. In all the religious traditions there are symptoms of this phenomenon, which betrays the place of God in the society.

#### **3.2. Irreligious ways in religions**

Religion is supposed to be the foundational drive in human life. But, sadly though, instead of being the motivational factor, much of the religious practices turn out to be empty rituals of no outcome. Leaders of religions become all the more showy and hypocritical in religious matters. Lack of genuineness in the religious expressions make religion lose its meaning. Many religious practices do not produce the intended values for facilitating the life process. They seem to contradict the purpose of religion itself. Religion is supposed to promote unity between the humans and the divine and between the humans and the humans. But often the humans neither get at the divine experience nor get related to the other humans. Religion seems to divide the society into smaller sections. Many who are scrupulously practicing religion are found irreligious in their thoughts, words and deeds, in relation to themselves and in relation

to others. A big section of them get afflicted with a communal mindset and entertain negative attitude towards other communities. *Such irreligious ways prevailing in the society make any one doubt whether God is present there at all.*

### **3.3. Non-religious ideologies**

The recent times, especially the second half of the twentieth century, have witnessed the rise of *ideologies that are not in line with the traditional religious ideologies*. Atheism, Secularism, Humanism, Communism and Marxism are the leading ones of the same. Although the dignity of the human being rests above all on the fact that he or she is called to communion with the Creator, non-religious trends seem to defy such a belief. Establishing right order in this world needs often a higher support, without which the social co-ordination can be disturbed. Even in cases of the violation of the fundamental rights of the human person, recourse to a spiritual power often helps, in the absence of which living together becomes difficult. Although discrimination between believers and unbelievers is not to be done on any grounds, non-religious tendencies seem to be greatly derailed as regards the fundamental orientation of life, which holds fast the idea of God.

### **3.4. Anti-God trends in the society**

*The biggest challenge to the place of God in the society is from the anti-God trends prevailing in the society.* Lawlessness, corruption, discrimination, inequality, manipulation, violence, murder and terrorism are some of the most serious negative trends. Lack of civic sense, lack of national-global thinking, greed, lack of respect for life, materialization of science and technology, pursuit of development bereft of values, etc., are other tendencies that disregard any existence of God. Poverty, illness, backwardness, suffering, etc., are some of the consequent social maladies the human society is afflicted with. The basic right to food, clothing and housing is seen violated in a rampant manner. A considerable portion of the society is still living below poverty line. A big section of the society is deprived of educational, medical and other social facilities. Many are denied the right to freely choose one's state of life and to set up a family and the right to employment. Several people are not able to enjoy the right to good name, respect and privacy. The sacred right to act according to the dictates of one's conscience and the rightful freedom even in matters of religion are gravely violated. Lot of lie and assassinating the other's character disturb the social order. The good of the human person is conveniently compromised with interest in oneself. Such grave symptoms of social pathology almost nullify any presence of God in the society. The real place of God in such situations is a matter of serious concern for all, especially for the religious traditions of the society. The human and spiritual values of life seem to have failed or become ineffective, to a great extent.

## CONCLUSION

*The whole creation put together is the family of the Creator.* The community of mankind is the natural culmination of the family of creation. The family of creation, especially the community of mankind, can be worthy of the spirit dwelling within only when the Creator is seen reflected in every item of it, through and through. The primary place of the Creator, may the same be understood and experienced in any name, form and place, can in no way be compromised in life. Religious traditions have developed various spiritual streams in order to attain and celebrate the divine, while being human. The Creator has endowed the modern society with technological advancements and multi-dimensional concepts and contacts. This has facilitated the phenomenon of religion to undergo a process of radical change.

*To be a good neighbour to every human being we meet is much more an inescapable duty today than ever.* Forms of social and cultural discrimination on the grounds of sex, ethnicity, race, colour, profession, ideology, social conditions, language, religion, and the like, must be curbed and eradicated, as they are totally incompatible with God's design. Religious communities have to stress their commonalities in order to foster unity among them. They should highlight their diversities for enriching one another, as well. The nations and communities of the world have to develop a spirit of complementariness and a culture of mutual cooperation, in order to make a world family. Religious leaders have to come together in a spirit of unity and co-operation, in order to facilitate a new life style in the world, permeated by the spiritual values of the human society. The human life then will radiate the divine presence in the society all the more in a sociological way and the primary place of God in the society will be intact. The dream and hope of a 'harmonious and dynamic society' will then be closer to reality.

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