

Essays On Cultural Pluralism

Excerpts

This new dimension in the evolving idea of God led Arab Muslim scientists after the advent of Islam to lay primary stress upon systematic observation and experimentation to discover the divinely ordained laws of nature. The medieval Arab intellectuals in their creative phase were the pioneers of the inductive or scientific method that much later blossomed in Western Europe into the scientific revolution of the modern age.

The scientific method of enquiry and the resultant technological growth has given man awesome control over nature, but has also blinded him to the limitations and dangers of making the scientific method the only valid paradigm of seeking knowledge. A large number of highly intelligent, informed and intellectually honest creative minds in the Western world have become indifferent to any truth-claim that is, avowedly, not verifiable in the narrow scientific sense. This approach indirectly devalues the crucial significance and centrality of truth-claims in the spheres of religion, ethics, aesthetics and spirituality. Truth-claims in the above spheres are removed from the category of objective truth and dumped into the 'lower' category of subjective belief or opinion. This approach is a blessing and a curse as well. It gives a deathblow to intolerance and fanaticism, but it also inhibits reflective enquiry in matters relating to domains other than natural science and technology.

Existential interpretations of the universe must take into account the full range of the different features of the universe without suppressing any feature that may not harmonize with the favored interpretation. This task presupposes a base of reliable factual knowledge as data. For instance, one must be aware of not only the beauty of nature, but also the extent of the aggression, pain and suffering inbuilt in the order of nature as such. For example, the interpretation that every particular event (in the literal sense) serves a cosmic purpose, or the interpretation that God loves and cherishes (in the literal sense) every single creature He creates does not grip or convince us in the face of such facts of life as the food chain or the enormous waste in the processes of nature. The existential interpretation must not be based on selective data only.

Speculative philosophers and theologians, however, tend to ignore facts that do not fit into their conceptual picture by revising the ordinary meanings or uses of words and expressions of a particular natural language. They project new or extraordinary meanings to the words of the language in question. They say, for instance, that God's love for His creatures is not the same as maternal love, or that what appears as tragic or evil is an instrumental good in a larger context. In other words, philosophers and theologians redefine, qualify, and prune the ordinary or usual meanings of words and expressions we use. The theologian does so in a spirit of defensive reverence to the tradition, while the philosopher freely assess whether or not he 'resonates' to the religious interpretation in question. This activity, however, does not involve deductive or inductive reasoning but existential elucidation-- illumination of one's hidden depth attitudes and inmost interpretative responses. The existential interpretation made by the philosopher is, thus, functionally similar to, but genetically different from religious faith. However, the philosopher's interpretation does partake of 'faith' in some sense and he cannot claim that it can be proved.

Many souls, however, cannot avoid an inner perplexity over some doctrine or moral rule of their cherished faith. They seek and often get inner peace through reflecting, clarifying or qualifying their beliefs, but sometimes they do not succeed. The agonizing perplexity of some highly sensitive truth seekers some times ends in a unique psycho-physical experience of quite shattering proportions. They report back that some mysterious light engulfed them and they lost the sense of being an isolated ego, and an ecstatic joy and inner peace and sense of oneness with the cosmos overwhelmed them. They all say that this experience cannot be explained to others

who have not had a similar experience. These are the mystics and seers who are found in all religions down the ages. They, however, give more or less similar reports of their experience, though this is punctuated by different symbols and images.

The separation of the functions of religion and of the state became fully de jure in the new world when the sprawling British colony in North America broke away from the mother country and emerged as the very first sovereign secular democratic United States of America after the Revolution in 1776. The separation of religion from the state and from political activity does not mean the rejection of religion or spirituality. The new idea was that the essence of religion lies in existential awe and surrender to the cosmic mystery, and that religious piety lies in following the cherished basic spiritual and moral values rather than a set of some fixed and closed code of laws mandated by some Authority. The founding fathers of the American constitution never for a moment imaged themselves as atheists or non-Christians; they affirmed only that no religion should claim to be the sole established or official religion of the state as such. They were quite emphatic that their stand was not the rejection of religion but only the rejection of the medieval idea of the union of state and religion.

The above idea of religion has been called 'religious liberalism' and the idea, in the course of time, has captured the imagination of the greater part of the human family. However, several Muslim quarters do not appreciate this logic and persist in what has been termed 'religious fundamentalism'.

Secularism, as a political concept, has a definite and clear-cut connotation. But the definition of any religion is, at bottom, a matter of choice and opinion. Every religion has several versions or layers. Both Gandhiji and Hedgewar claimed to be good Hindus but their ideas of Hinduism differed. Gandhiji remarked that if untouchability be regarded as an integral part of Hinduism he was not prepared to call himself a Hindu. A constitutionally secular state, therefore, is better placed than a Hindu or Islamic state to guarantee and protect fundamental human rights to all citizens irrespective of caste, color, creed or gender.

Muslims stand at the crossroads of religious liberalism and religious fundamentalism. This was always the case, but the stakes are much greater today due to the complexities of the modern age. Muslims must not commit the fallacy of reducing Islam to one favored model (that, supposedly, meets all the requirements of the modern age) and then just dismiss the idea of secular democracy as unnecessary or redundant for 'true' Muslims. Exactly the same remarks apply to those Hindu quarters that decry Nehru's alleged penchant for imitating the West.

The great Sufi saints and Indian seers and sages of the past were quite ignorant of modern science and technology and their information was much less than the level of common knowledge today, but their minds and hearts were fountains of love and wisdom. To spread humanistic love, to promote the welfare of the entire human family without any distinction of 'we' and 'they', to exhort all (irrespective of their religion or sect) to feel and respond to the presence of the Supreme Spirit in their own soul rather than to convert others to formal Islam or any other religion was their principal mission of life. It is another matter that (due to some social and political factors) common people, especially the weaker and under-privileged segments of society, freely embraced formal Islam. The fact that the Sikh scriptures abound in Sufi texts, and followers of all religions deeply revere saints like Kabir and Sai Baba of Shirdi is eloquent testimony to this truth and the genius of the Indian people.

A large proportion of sincere Muslim believers have a very confused idea of polytheism or 'shirk'. They suppose, for instance, that all Hindus are polytheists and that all Christians (despite being 'people of the book')

are also polytheists. But this is not at all the self-image of an authentic Christian believer. He is very clear that he believes in one Supreme Being or God. The same remarks apply to Hindu believers. They certainly do not equate idols with the Supreme Being or Brahman or Bhagwan. The idol worshiper (rightly or wrongly) believes the idol is a 'locus' of the Supreme or some aspect of the Supreme, not the Supreme Being as such. The formal monotheist hardly suspects numerous believers in One God also equate their own subjective conception of God with the Supreme Being as He is in Himself beyond all human comprehension. Conceptual fanaticism, as pointed out by the great Sufi poet, Jalaluddin Rumi, and others, is a subtle form of idolatry that escapes detection.

Religious plurality does not produce any conflict, individual or social, so long as religion is treated as a means of spiritual growth rather than of political or economic power. Separating religion from politics, however does not amount to permitting the separation of morality from politics. In other words, the concept of secular politics does not logically imply amoral politics.

The religious attitude, by itself is not a panacea for human ills, or atheism the root cause of the strife and violence ever present in man's history. Strife and violence spring from man's struggle for survival in a harsh world, and his hunger, almost irrepressible, to reach out for the largest slice of the cake without caring for the other. The solution to the human predicament lies, not in moralizing or spirituality alone, but in our giving effective help towards the establishment of social justice in the human family as a whole.

Wisdom is insight into moral good and evil, and the proper attitudes to self, and others, in the concrete conduct of life as a whole. A wise man is, thus, not he who is an expert in logic, mathematics, science or other branches of knowledge, but does not know what to do, when he is betrayed by a friend or loved one, or when his son is killed in an accident, or when old age, disease or danger confronts him with impending death. Wisdom is constituted by proper attitudes to the world, knowledge by the accurate awareness of the world. Wisdom and knowledge are, however, related, since the proper attitude or the right response to an object, presupposes accurate awareness or knowledge of its nature or its properties.

In the pre-scientific era, philosophy itself, in the form of speculative ontology and cosmology, provided knowledge. The different branches of natural and social sciences now perform this task, separately and jointly. And history, in the broad sense, is the source, par excellence, of such knowledge since every scientific discipline has its own history of development.

The victory of Akbar over Rajput Kings, the successful defiance by Shivaji of the might of the Mughal empire, the crushing of the 1857 rebellion against foreign rule in India, the heroic saga of Stalingrad, the humiliating defeat of Mussolini and Hitler, etc., are judged as happy triumphs or sad defeats, not in terms of the racial or religious affiliations or the interests and aspirations of the protagonists, but in terms of their historical role in promoting universal values. Likewise, the martyrdom of a Socrates, Bruno, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, or the sufferings of a Galileo, Priestley, Freud, Karl Jaspers, purify and inspire the universal man, no less deeply than the martyrdom of a Husain or Sarmad or the sufferings of Hambal or of Abul Kalam Azad.

The universal man explains the vicissitudes of the human family, not as the wages of sin or as the favors of an anthropomorphic God, or as the trials and travails of a chosen people, who have betrayed their Lord but who are destined to conquer the non-believers at a time of God's own choosing; the universal man tries to understand the ups and downs of the human family, as a doctor tries to understand human health and disease, free from praise or blame, pride or prejudice, anger or hate. The historian who has humanistic sympathy and cares for historical

veracity explains the vicissitudes of the human family in terms of universal social dynamics, which does not preclude his faith in God or in any particular Divine revelation.

Faith in the oneness of God does not necessarily imply 'one God, one church, i.e., cultural monism; faith in one God implies man's unity in diversity and diversity in unity. History teaches us not to feel hurt or displeased at the pluralism of language, religion and culture, but to view them all as the flowering of man's creative responses to the mystery of being. When the historian-philosopher truly and deeply realizes this he shares, partly, if not wholly, the joy of the mystic at the contemplation of the unity of all being.