

Epilogue

The Perennial Human Situation

Several highly sensitive and noble souls when confronting the immense vastness and complex order of the cosmos have felt overwhelmed by a sense of wonder and awe. At times they have passed through transformative depth experiences that have deeply convinced them that all that exists (including their own self) is part of a mysterious and complex Unity. This Unity is beyond human comprehension, but its wordless contemplation fills them with joy, peace and surrender to a nameless supreme Source of all that exists. Those who bear witness to this inner experience include (in addition to the great prophets of the Semitic tradition and the great sages of the Indian Brahmanical tradition) other enlightened souls, such as Plato (d. 347 BCE), Pascal (d. 1662 CE), Spinoza (d. 1667 CE), Kant (d. 1804 CE), Goethe (d. 1832 CE), Wordsworth (d. 1850 CE), Schiller (d. 1805 CE), Schleiermacher (d. 1834 CE), Blake (d. 1827 CE), Shelley (d. 1822 CE), Rudolph Otto (d. 1937 CE), Tolstoy (d. 1910 CE), Tagore (d. 1941 CE), Gandhi (d. 1948 CE), Einstein (d. 1955 CE) et al. The great mystics, poets and artists belonging to *every* religion, region and age have participated (in varying degrees) in this basic experience.

This elemental depth response of the enlightened soul, quite obviously, is not equivalent to the acceptance of any religious creed or the idea or concept of a Creator God (as affirmed by most theistic religions). Nor is there any conclusive 'proof' that this 'existential response' is universal or that it is valid or true in the scientific or logical sense. On the other hand, there is also no conclusive justification for rejecting the response as invalid or false. Indeed, an inner response can never be true or false in the sense in which a cognitive truth claim can be shown as true or false; it is true (for an individual) if the truth-claim in question evokes an existential echo from the depths of his or her being; it is false (for an individual) if there be no such 'echo'. Religious faith is 'existentially' certain, not 'logically' or 'scientifically' certain. The same is the case with

moral or ethical judgments.¹

The mature depth response to the mystery of the cosmos is not the product of cultural conditioning as are the various creedal beliefs of different religious traditions. Creedal beliefs can be imposed upon or programmed into the plastic mind or *tabula rasa* of the child, but he or she does not have the capacity of making a depth response to the cosmic mystery until he or she becomes an adult. And even when he does so he needs proper training and encouragement to travel on this path. Alas! the vast majority of believers (no matter what their religion) take the path of conventional creedal indoctrination and organized conformity. Moreover, parents or teachers who point out and place the child on the conventional road exclude all other roads. To some extent this restriction is necessary for preventing confusion and error. But beyond a certain point this approach cannot but dilute the pure sense of wonder and spiritual 'openness' of the child. The child may become a good 'learner' and make steady progress on the track its mentor puts him on. But neither the learner nor the mentor may be aware that because of too much indoctrination the child might lose on the virginal sensitivity, 'openness' and 'wordless wonder' – the spiritual treasures, of the human soul.²

Creeds and dogmas may wax or wane, may appeal to one but leave the other indifferent, may fascinate one but amuse the other. However, the divine flame of spiritual wonder, the wordless but prayerful surrender to the cosmic mystery and retreat into inner silence of the spirit (*shoonya*) is, to my mind, the only 'jewel that shines by its own light'. Once we accept this we begin to see that different creeds, dogmas or thought patterns are, in essence, different languages or alternate linguistic systems for conceptualizing the mystery of the cosmos beyond human comprehension. Keeping alive the sense of wonder and awe while contemplating the totality (viewed as the Supreme Mystery) or ever living in the presence of the Supreme Creator and ever engaged in 'righteous action' becomes far more important for the good life than the profession of the (supposedly) only one creedal truth that brings about human salvation.

The above approach is the core of the contemporary world inter-faith movement. This approach is slowly but steadily spreading among the most enlightened and perceptive quarters of the human family in the modern scientific and technological age. The great mystics and poets

of the world had already proclaimed and lived this truth. I submit, the Quran too does the same, provided we read it without the gloss of the human interpretations that have been placed on the text in the course of history. Western thinkers, philosophers and even theologians (who are well versed in the study of comparative cultural studies) have embraced the crucial insight that religious truth is existential and can never be established in the manner in which logical or scientific truth-claims can be proved. Eminent scientists agree that man cannot live by science alone, but needs spiritual food for his or her all round growth as a complete human being. Respect for the authentic free choice of the human adult and loving tolerance of all religions and creeds and giving equal freedom to all truth-claims (including the position of skeptics and atheists) to grow and prosper under democratic auspices is the only road to the haven of world understanding and peace.

This, indeed, was the basic philosophy of the founding fathers of the American constitution, as also of the Indian. Both the documents are based on the principled separation of the functions of the state and of religion. Neither of the two is anti-religion and both are neutral to all religions. This neutrality does not mean or imply that the constitution allows or encourages indifference to ethical values under the garb of separating politics from religion. amoral politics or the pursuit of power without caring for right means is, certainly not, an integral part of the connotation of secular politics or secularism, per se. amoral politics is a human failing or aberration in general rather than necessarily involved in or peculiar to secularism. Indeed, numerous secular politicians or persons living in different countries or societies are far more morally upright or ethical in their political behaviour than the votaries of the religious approach to politics, whatever religion they might profess.³

Reading or reciting my favourite Quranic surahs or verses in the original Arabic profoundly moves me and millions of Muslims and also many others. However, other scriptures can and do inspire others in the same way. I accept this in wonder and humility at the power of different 'sources of inspiration and inner light'. Individuals may get inner light and inspiration from a variety of historical sources, but the ultimate or apex Source is one. The crucial question is not where the light comes from; the crucial question is whether there is light in the inner world of

the individual. Any deeply committed believer (no matter what his religion) who acts righteously (according to his authentic values), does not coerce or maltreat others, and concedes that his own conceptualization of the Supreme Mystery of Being is not the only window to the unknown, he/she, to my mind, is, a co-believer or fellow pilgrim on the journey of life. To give an analogy from the realm of human love, if one truly loves, no matter whom he loves, he/she attains to the highest level of bliss and blessedness. Obviously, in the realm of love every lover has his/her own beloved and this love brings one into the portals of the Divine.⁴

To put it differently, the fruit of spirituality can and does blossom on different theological creeds. The essence of spirituality or religious faith, at its best, is the realization of the truth of the unity of all existence and the striving to translate this idea into concrete action. I would, therefore, submit that in the modern age the bare minimum connotation or core of the Islamic faith is as follows: God is one, and the Quran is the apex revealed 'Word of God' with Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as the perennial exemplar and guide for the Muslims in the never-ending and ever evolving quest for the good life. This approach, however, does not imply that there are no other human exemplars and guides who perform the same function for other believers. This ideal of spiritual pluralism is embedded in the Quran itself when we read it without the gloss of its various interpretations in the course of the temporal history of Islam and when one tries to discover the spirit and thrust of the authentic life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, uncontaminated by myth, miracle or the personality cult.⁵