RELIGIONS IN CIVIL SOCIETY

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1.1. ABSTRACT

In this concise article, I would like to present four models of relating religion and state. Here, let me highlight the fourth model which is a positive approach to religious pluralism and discusses it with reference to the Indian Constitution. Distancing from social structural orientations which assume that the inter-religious conflicts will cease with economic development, I would like to draw the attention to the importance of a continuing inter-religious dialogue and conversation that is respectful of differences. Such a dialogue can help us to overcome many tangles and lead us towards conflict-resolution. If, in general, dialogue has been, in the past, associated with the issue of evangelization and liberation, today, I feel, we need to move towards a dialogue of religions as members in the civil society. It will be a dialogue centered on what concerns the public order and well-being.

1.2. KEY WORDS:

Religion and Society, Globalization, Secularist, Materialistic Culture, Civilizations, dialogue, Public order, Pluralism.

1.3. INTRODUCTION

The age of globalization seems to have provided a new intensity to inter-religious conflicts. One would have expected that the exchange of information facilitated by the extent and rapidity of the mass media would have promoted an increasing understanding and consequent acceptance among the religions. Instead, the processes of globalization seem to have radicalized opposition between religions. There are many reasons for this. **First of all**, globalization is promoting a secularist, materialistic culture against which the religions need to defend themselves and reaffirm their identity and relevance to society. **Secondly**, migration has made societies religiously pluralistic everywhere. The other believer is not

somewhere far away. S/he is next door impinging on my awareness everyday with her/his religious and correspondingly cultural difference. **Thirdly**, in a struggle for scarce resources, especially among the poor of the world, religious identity becomes communalistic when the cementing force of religion is made use of for promoting an economic and political agenda. People who share the same beliefs are made to feel that they also share the same economic and political interests which they have to defend and promote.

Fourthly, As a matter of fact, observers of social movements foresee that religious and cultural divisions will play an increasing role in global conflicts. In the emerging era, clashes of civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace, and an international order based on civilizations is the surest safeguard against world order.[1] It is significant that civilizations are identified with religions. While the Christian civilization is identified as 'Western', the others are identified as Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, etc. Should the religions become unwilling instruments and victims of such global civilizational conflicts or could they play a prophetic role to bring peace and harmony among people? What role are religions playing in civil society? Can they play alternative roles? Such questions are of great interest to many believers. While every religion has its share of fundamentalists, many believers think that religions should be forces for peace rather than conflict. How can they do so? We can try to answer these questions only after we have seen how religions have related and relate to civil society; how civil societies have handled and are handling religious pluralism and what impact will globalization have on these matters.

1.4. RELIGION AND SOCIETY

Though economic and political structures are important in providing, a material foundation to civil society, it is culture that unites a group of people by offering them a particular world view that provides meaning and vision to their lives, a system of values that governs their behaviour, a framework of rituals that create and regulate their relationships. Religion is the deepest element in culture, in so far as it deals with the ultimate concerns of life, its origin and goal and its final significance. Culture and religion are communitarian. Though we can note a progressive differentiation between religion and society in the course of history at least in the West, they are closely related. The civil authority has always tried to use the strong cementing force of religion to hold the people together. The early ecumenical Councils were convened and presided over by emperors who seemed to have been more interested in the unity of faith than the church leaders. In former times, kings were considered gods or sons of God: religion was identified with a socio-political group. Even today no real distinction between religion and civil society is accepted in the Islamic tradition. In Hinduism there was a distinction between priests and kings, but they were linked to each other by a variety of mutual obligations.

In Christianity civil society has progressively freed itself from the domination of religion, so that we can speak of a secularization of society, though the secular order had to fight for its freedom all along the way. The consequence has been the privatization of religion. Strictly speaking, at the level of

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[1] Samuel P.Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (London: Touchstone Books, 1996), p.321.

civil society, what we have is a greater or lesser separation between religion (Church) and civil society (State). This separation however may be more apparent than real. In most European countries, Christian democratic parties with a religious inspiration still play an important role. Even in France, which is the most secular constitutionally, other religions do not enjoy the same rights as Christian. England still has an established religion: its monarch is also the head of the national Church. In the United States of America, analysts speak of a civil religion which has strong roots in a liberal Protestant Christian tradition. The link between religion and society is so strong that secularism itself takes on the trappings of a 'religious' ideology.

1.5. STATES AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

It is because of this close link between religion and society that religious pluralism in civil society becomes problematic. How have the States handled the phenomenon of religious pluralism among its people? Looking around the different States in the world, we can see broadly **four ways** of coming to terms with religious pluralism in the context of civil society.

First, In **Marxism**-inspired societies religions have no public space at all at the level of the political order. At the level of civil life, they may have a very controlled presence, strictly private. Religions are positively discouraged, marginalized and even persecuted. Pluralism is no problem at all.

We have, **secondly**, **confessional States**. Most States where a majority of the people are Muslims declare themselves Islamic states. They may go further and adopt *Shariat* as the law of the land. Religious minorities are promised freedom to practice their religion, though they may be harassed in various ways. In any case, the religions of the minority groups become the private affair of those groups. They can have no direct place or influence in civil society. The minority groups therefore can continue as second class citizens, without any real participation in civil society. Such a situation is true also of migrants in Europe today, even if they are considerable minorities. They are not recognized as citizens even if they have lived there for more than a generation; or they may have voting rights, but have no real influence in the cultural and civil society of the country outside their own group.

A third way of solving the problem of religious pluralism in civil society is to have a **strict separation between religion and the State**. The State is said to be secular. The secular spirit may also spread to other areas of civil life like education, social services, and even culture. The declared aim of such societies is to reduce religions to the private sphere. As long as religions remain in the private sphere, they will not be disturbed. Such secularism may be promoted aggressively, as in the United States of America. Or it may be fervently hoped for without being imposed as is the case of some groups in India. There were two groups among the makers of the Indian Constitution.[2] One group was committed to the 'scientific spirit'. They believed that with the progress of science and technology religion would eventually weaken and disappear. In the meantime they were ready to tolerate the

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[2] For an interesting discussion of the whole issue of secularism from the perspective of history as well as that of different religions, see T.N. Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

practice of religion provided it remained private. Another group, however, **interpreted Indian secularism as a positive attitude of equal respect to all religions. This then leads us to the fourth solution to the problem of religious pluralism in civil society.**

1.6. A POSITIVE APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Instead of trying to describe this fourth solution in the abstract, let us see what the Indian Constitution proposes and then critically comment on it.[3] The aim of civil society is to secure liberty, equality, fraternity and justice for all the citizens. These are spelt out in terms of fundamental rights. The fundamental rights include the liberty to practice and propagate any religion of one's choice. This freedom however is "subject to public order, morality and health". The State should not discriminate among its citizens on grounds of religion. The State however reserves the right to make laws "regulating or restricting any economic, financial or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice".

Besides this general protection of liberty of religious profession and practice, the Constitution also protects the right of minority groups, including religious ones, to protect and promote their identity through appropriate means like schools and other development institutions. We can note here a tension between the desire to protect the identity and liberty of different religious groups and at the same time to ensure the fundamental rights and wellbeing of the citizens under the rubric "public order, morality and health".

This tension was shown clearly in the area of laws governing the relations of citizens in civil matters like marriage and inheritance. On the one hand, the different religious groups were allowed to follow their own personal laws in these matters, on the other hand, the Constitution expressed a desire that the country should move towards a uniform civil code. Let me note here in passing that this desire of the Constitution to move towards a uniform civil code has not been respected even after nearly 50 years. One of the reasons for this is the fear of the minorities that in a society with a large Hindu majority, the uniform civil code legislated in parliament may actually turn out to be the code of the majority. Perhaps the proper way towards a uniform civil code in a pluralistic society is not through parliamentary legislation in which majority minority factors come into play, but through widespread consultation leading to a consensus.

It is not my intention here to comment elaborately on the Indian Constitution. Let me draw the reader's attention, however, to a few interesting points relevant to our discussion. While the western approach to civil liberties is spelt out in terms of individual rights, the Indian Constitution takes seriously the identity and rights of groups, especially of the minorities. Such an approach is very much discussed today in terms of multiculturalism in North America both in the USA and in Canada. Particularly in the USA, what was touted as the "melting pot" is now becoming a "salad bowl", in

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[3] Gurpreet Mahajan, *Identities and Rights: Aspects of Liberal Democracy In India*, (Delhi:Oxford University Press, 1998), p.121

which the identities of different cultural groups have to be respected and integrated in the ordering of civil society. The Indian Constitution has tried to do this seriously by its recognition of minority rights.

Secondly, a strict separation between religions and State is not adhered to. While the autonomy of the religions in the sphere of strictly religious practice is respected, the State reserves the right to intervene to protect the fundamental rights of citizens even against prescriptions of religious institution and codes. Thus, for instance, untouchability has been made illegal and all are allowed to enter the temples irrespective of the caste they belong to. The Courts have also consistently intervened in defending the civil rights of people against any encroachment from religious institution. Finally, by protecting the minorities from the tyranny of the majority, it is implicity pointing to a different type of democratic order, that will not simply be rule by the majority, but a search for consensus through ongoing conversation and consultation in which everyone can participate.

1.7. RESPECTING DIFFERENCE

In an interreligious context, the focus on cultural and religious groups rather than only on individuals and the possibility of working towards a consensus through consultation in civil matters rather than imposing the will of a majority on every one are extremely interesting when we speak about dialogue. We would expect that dialogue does precisely this: accept and respect the identity of the other religious group and work on the principle of conversation and consensus formation in setting achieving social goals, both civil and religious.

The need for such a process has been highlighted by social psychologists who have been studying situations of conflict. Sudhir Kakar, after a study of Hindu-Muslim riots in Hyderabad through extensive interviews, comes to the following conclusion: The secularist, who views the conflict as rooted in social structural consideration, especially economic, is more sanguine on the future of Hindu-Muslim relations. In the long run, the secularist believes, the inevitable economic development of the country will alter social-structural conditions and thus assign the conflict, as the cliche would have it, to the dust heap of history' as the religious identities fade and play less and less of a role in private and public life. A sceptical note on the belief in the primacy of political and economic structures in the shaping of consciousness, however, needs to be sounded... The optimistic realist, a breed with which I identify, believes that we are moving towards an era of recognition of Hindu-Muslim differences rather than pursuing their chimerical commonalities. We are moving toward a multiculturalism, with majority and minority cultures, rather than the emergence of a 'composite culture'... The realist would say that the solution is to build a state which protects the equal rights of Hindus and Muslims to be different... Being sceptic, he is also aware that the creation of such a public realm may be a long drawn-out affair accompanied by much tension and open conflict between the communities which will strain the social and political fabric of the country.[4]

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[4] Sudhir Kakar, *The Colours of Violence,* (Delhi: Viking, 1995), pp.252-253.

1.8. DIALOGUE AS CONFLICT RESOLUTION

I think that it is here that interreligious dialogue has an important and indispensable role to play. Exploring the nature and function of interreligious dialogue a group of Asian theologians said: In the developing, multi-religious societies of Asia, struggling towards liberation and wholeness, all religions are called to provide a common and complimentary moral and religious foundation for this struggle, and be forces for growth and communion rather than sources of alienation and conflict. They can do this only through dialogue and collaboration. The religions have a prophetic role in public life. They should not become victims either of those who seek to keep them apolitical and private, or of those who seek to instrumentalize them for political and communal ends.[5]

There seems however to be a supposition that such dialogue must focus on the commonalities between the religions and not on the differences that may be the causes of tension. Looking at the various dialogue groups in India and elsewhere in Asia, I have the impression that the different believers who come together tend to speak more on what unites them than on what they disagree about. They also tend to limit their discussion to strictly religious issues like prayer, doctrine and theology and not to speak on the social and political issues which may have their repercussion on religious conflict. The Parliament of the World's Religions, which met in Chicago in August 1993, came out with a Declaration "Toward a Global Ethic in order to global order of peace".[6] This declaration focuses on ethical principles on which all the religions already agree. I would think that in a situation of interreligious conflict, if we wish to bring about peace, we should look into the factors that are causing the conflict rather than abstract ethical principles on which they are already in agreement.[7] In this context we could speak of dialogue itself as conflict resolution. We could even go further and say that conflicts can be necessary and creative if we wish to promote peace with justice. As Franklin Dukes says: In a democratic society conflict is the basis for social change. If there is to be just relationship, if change is to occur, latent conflicts must be made visible to all parties. It is through confrontation and advocacy that needs gain currency and legitimacy; in many situations it is this confrontation alone that forces the recognition of interdependence that makes negotiation possible.[8] An examination of conflicts between religious groups will show that their cause is not often religious belief but attempts to make use of religious group identity for economic advantage or political domination. The conflicts in Ireland, Palestine, Kashmir or Indonesia have nothing to do with religion, but everything to do with economics and politics.

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[5] John Gnanapragasam and Felix Wilfred (eds), *Being Church in Asia*. (Manila:Claretian Publications, 1994), pp.9-10.

[6] Hans Kung and Karl-Josef Kuschel (eds), *A Global Ethic*. (London: SCM Press, 1993), p.78.

[7] Michael Amaladoss, "Difficult Dialogue", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 62, (1998) pp.567-579.

[8] E. Franklin Dukes, *Resolving Public Conflict. Transforming Community and Governance*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p.164.

1.9. CONCLUSION

In the past, interreligious dialogue has been examined as a dimension of evangelization, which in turn was understood as directed to conversion as a change of religious allegiance. Such dialogue was contrasted with proclamation and seen as a step towards it. Dialogue then remains an activity purely at the religious level. When evangelization was understood as including liberation as the dialogue of the Gospel with the poor then interreligious dialogue was also related to the liberation of the poor. Religions together were supposed to provide the ethical and spiritual motivation and inspiration for the liberative struggle. Without discounting any of these functions of interreligious dialogue in the context of the relationship of the Good News to peoples, their cultures and their religions, we should move further to understand the role of religion in civil society and see how believers of different religions living together as members of one civil society can promote peace and human wellbeing, by highlighting the impact of religion on public order.

This seems particularly important in the era of globalization. Materialistic consumerism is the moving force behind globalization. In pursuit of monetary profit people who control the market are ready to sacrifice not only nature but the humans. The only antidote to such a movement is a counter-cultural movement of peoples that stand up for the fundamental human and spiritual values that must guide life in local and global community. Religions are not ends in themselves. They are to promote life in freedom and lead to fullness, though these goals may be understood differently by different religions. They must help people to take responsibility for their lives and their relationships and not surrender their initiative to market forces and money makers. The real alternative to globalization is not another globalizing ideology, even if it be religious. We need rather to affirm the local and the different though they are called to conversation and communion. This is a time when all people of good will, of every religion and ideology, must stand together, networking with each other, to confront the global enemy. Interreligious dialogue can and must help to form such a coalition of people's movements.

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