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A Pluralisim Solution

Hinduisms view of religious coexistance holds the answer to the delima of religious conflict

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In the last century political ideologies led to two world wars, killing millions. The challenge of religious contentions in the new century is perhaps even more worrying. Religions generate much stronger passions. They tell us, Ã¢ÃÅCarry out this much finite activity here on Earth and we offer you infinite rewards in the hereafter.Ã¢ÃÃ¹ The risk/reward ratio is skewed to the extreme. If we kill in the name of religion or are killed in the name of religion, surely that is a small price to pay for an infinite reward in the hereafter! How can we diffuse the situation?

Politicians and diplomats work away frantically, saying "Surely these issues will get resolved by diplomatic maneuvering, or political haggling! Surely, all this is a matter of economics, the control of the oil fields! We need to show greater justice to some disadvantaged people." Our American friends think that

the situation can easily be resolved through military action. But all these political, diplomatic, economic, judicial or military approaches, at best are mere patchwork solutions. The resolution of a problem that arises in the name of religion lies firmly in the field of religion. Only wholesome spirituality can tackle religious issues. These problems have not arisen because of growing global religiousness.

The reason is precisely the opposite. The role of religions in our highly secular world is unclear, and mainstream aspirants are no longer there to underpin religions. On one side, society is adopting materialism. At the other end, religions are falling increasingly into the hands of simpletons. The rational and tolerant elements of religions are pushed aside in favor of the more fanatic elements within religions. We forget that we just cannot afford to ignore religions. Even if one believes all religions to be erroneous, even then these issues must be tackled and contained. We do not have the luxury of living in isolation, practicing our own exclusive religion. We live in modern, multi-faith societies where operating as single-faith communities is not an option. But how can many exclusivist religions coexist in a single society? That is the issue.

Hinduism offers a unique "pluralism" as the solution. It says that the same ultimate reality called God can be thought of and approached in different ways. Why different ways. It is because we are different, comes the answer. The goal may be the same, but as we are different, coming from different backgrounds, inspired by different prophets and scriptures, the manner in which we relate to the same Ultimate will necessarily be different. This proposal would suggest that however relevant our prophets and scriptures are to us, they

only have contextual validity and not absolute validity. They relate to us and only to that extent can be considered to be absolute; but not for the rest of mankind. Imagine two children telling each other, "My mum is best." "No, my mum is best in the world." They both have tremendous love for their mothers and cannot tolerate the other, so they fight. A wise man settles it, saying, "Add two words, "My mum is best for me." Then both are right, and the fighting ends.

These thoughts arose after a series of talks on interfaith issues given to Christian ministers at the London Interfaith Center and North Thames Ministerial College in January of this year, and my interfaith colleagues have great difficulty with this. It suggests that their prophets and scriptures are no longer absolute but only have contextual validity. Sounds blasphemous! The best that mainstream religions can say is, "We tolerate other religions," meaning, "We hold the monopoly on the Absolute others somehow exist on the fringes." But how can any religion claim to hold the Absolute within its framework of prophets, scriptures, doctrines and dogmas? By the very definition of Absolute, if anything can encapsulate it, then it is no longer Absolute, as the religion that has captured it has now become bigger than the Absolute! Hindu teachings about this are very clear, saying, "At best, even the most esoteric religions can only offer a "perception of the Absolute" but never the Absolute." If the mainstream religions adopt this idea, the sharp edges seen dividing the major religions disappear. This simple idea says, "Your prophet and scriptures suit you and are best for you. My prophets and scriptures are ideal for my purposes, so why threaten or feel threatened by each other?" This is the Hindu concept of pluralism. We need to be brave enough, religious enough, to recognize the limitations of what we perceive as absolute.

Many Christians shudder at this proposal, as it suggests that the prophets or the scriptures they hold so dear are a "perception" rather than the real thing. But this pluralism does not suggest that we have to water down our own faith or beliefs. In fact, pluralism suggests that our faith is perhaps the most suited to our requirements. There is no need to shop around, change direction or emulate other faiths. We should hang on to our own path with full confidence and greater vigor. God is infinite. If He is present in other faiths, that does not reduce His presence in our own faith! Pluralism has never promoted the idea that we take bits of all religions and produce some mix of all faiths called pluralism....What a grotesque idea!

One of my interfaith colleagues suggested that since theologians will not easily adopt pluralism, why not be practical and focus on developing shared interfaith human values rather than religious teachings? My response is this will be precisely the outcome if the secular lobby gets its way in toning religion down, blaming religion for our serious problems. In this scenario religions would have lost out to the secular lobby.

The second criticism of pluralism is the fallacious question, "Why give pluralism, another dogma, a better footing than the 'exclusivist agenda'?" It fails to hit the target. Pluralism never says that its approach is somehow "absolute." Then why invoke it? Because mankind today needs it! Religions promoting exclusivist agendas just cannot coexist without thumping each other! We have two choices: incorporate Hindu style pluralism within all faiths quickly or do so only after some serious catastrophes.

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