

The Dialogue of the Spirit

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Often, what happens as 'religious dialogue' is not dialogue, it seems to me, for two reasons. First, we are not really speaking to each other as religious communities, but addressing the public expressing sentiments which seek to continue a measure of self justification of our own religious positions with an equal measure of politeness and courtesy to other religions. That, of course, is useful, especially to reduce tensions between religious communities - a desperate need in India today. But dialogue is speaking to each other, not a common addressing of the public.

Secondly, dialogue is a process in which people seek to transcend the boundaries of their own limited understanding of reality in order to become more open to the truth through listening to, and conversing with one's dialogue partners. In many dialogues, there is no conversation, no real listening, no genuine opening up of one's own identity to be transformed by the other in a relationship of mutual love and sharing.

Talking about dialogue, it is generally recognized now-a-days that there are three different levels of dialogue - we will call them practical level, the theoretical level and the symbolic and ritual level.

At the practical level, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Jews and Parsees can confer together on any practical issue- on how to combat the price increase, how to fight against hoarding and black marketing, how to solve the problem in the North East, or how to prevent Communal riots in Aligarh or Moradabad. In such a dialogue at the practical level, there is no need to go to a detailed discussion of our faith and beliefs as Hindus, Muslims, and Christians etc. but can take for granted a common commitment to a principle like peace or justice or human rights or mutual understanding and communal harmony. This is the level of dialogue which many people in the west, as well as Indians trained in the west prefer. This does not involve the violation of one's own privacy; there is no need to go through the

agony of exposing one's faith and convictions to another; there is no need for abstract metaphysical or theological discussion. We can all remain at sufficiently exalted and detached "liberal" level, confining our discussion to strategies and programmes. It is clean dialogue, and can sometimes be extremely effective and useful.

Then there is this second level - that of theology or ideology or doctrine or world-view or whatever. Here we concentrate the discussion on concepts - the Hindu view of Man, the Islamic view of Man, the Christian view of Man, or alternatively different views of salvation, cosmology, God etc. Here one touches more deeply on convictions and ways of thinking, and quite quickly come across differences of outlook and understanding, even while finding large areas of agreement. In our own situation in India, the Hindu-Christian dialogue has concentrated its efforts at this level - concepts of incarnation versus Avatar, understanding of History, of Creation, of God-Man or God-World relationships etc. Many philosophical congresses and inter-religious conferences in India when they go beyond the platform variety of dialogue, do go into these intricate conceptual problems, and succeed in bringing out an immense amount of illumination and edification. At this level more patience and sympathy are required than at the practical level. The dialogue partners have to be faithful.

Let us now turn to the third level viz. symbolic and ritual level.

Two Kinds of Symbols

Symbols can be at least at two different levels. The more obvious symbols have a meaning which we can partly translate into rational categories, e.g., the national flag, the olive branch, the dove of peace, etc. These symbols are rooted in history and have some relation to a past historical event of some significance to the people to whom the symbol is meaningful. There are other symbols which border line - they convey more than rationally explicable meaning - the crescent moon and the star, the cross, the hammer and sickle, the Lamb of God, the wheel of prayer and so on. They go beyond the conscious level to meaning levels which cannot be translated exhaustively into concepts. But they too have historical origins which partly explain

their power to communicate meaning. There are other symbols which are of archetypal origin. Archetypes are primordial images in the collective unconscious of a historical- cultural group of people, and usually are not operative at the conscious level. They usually function when the conscious mind is not active, such as in dream, trance or ritually produced ecstasy. In fact, they serve to hide reality from the conscious mind, but at the same time to open reality to the total mind at sub-conscious levels. The archetypes may be drawn from real life like the father image or the mother image or the grandfather image, or they could be drawn from myth and folklore, like angels, demons, fairies, mythical animals or birds and so on. The two different kinds of symbols may therefore be described as those that speak to the conscious mind and those that are capable of reaching the non-conscious levels of our total consciousness, The distinction should not be held in too neat a fashion, for the unconscious or subconscious levels are constantly impinging upon our seemingly rational and self-aware conscious perception. Motivations for conscious action often arise from the unconscious level.

Precisely because the two levels of consciousness cannot be so neatly separated from each other, it is important not to confine inter-religious communication to either of these levels, even in non-verbal and symbolic communication.

Rites and rituals are symbolic corporate actions of a community using both types of symbols. One of the tragedies of Christian worship particularly has been the tendency to regard the liturgy as a set form of words to be repeated by the community. The liturgy is not a form for worship; it is primarily a community act, a corporate symbolic action. Words and symbols form part of the liturgical act, but they do not in any sense exhaust their meaning.

People sometimes ask me if they can come and participate the Indian Orthodox liturgy when I celebrate it. Usually they are people outside the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Politely I would say to them that they of course would be welcome. But I am not sure that one who comes as a spectator can be a real participant in the liturgical act. A liturgical act is one into which one has been initiated and in which one feels sufficiently at home as not to be under pressure or

tension to understand consciously or rationally every symbolic act, gesture or symbol. The function of a liturgy is not to transmit conscious or rational meaning. It is an act of the community in which it communicates to its members meanings at transcendent and unconscious levels. I might explain to you what the censer (by which we communicate both visual and nasal symbols to the participant) and the incense burning in it typify, but until one becomes initiated into that pattern of communicating meaning, it remains a curiosity and sometimes a symbol which arouses hostile reactions in people of the Reformation or secular traditions in the West. If one goes to a typical Tibetan worship service, a Western observer feels that a lot of time is wasted in meaningless and long chants and mantras which could not communicate any meaning to the observer, and therefore presumably none to the Buddhist participant as well. Only the well trained observer would recognise that the chants produce vibrations which produce changes in one's body and mind and unconsciously transform the chanter as well as the chanting community.

A conscious awareness of the unconscious meaning transmitted by a community act of worship may sometimes be counter-productive, for too much arousal of the conscious mind shuts off access to the unconscious and trans-rational levels of our consciousness. That is one reason why initiation and training are of primary importance for participation in a traditional liturgical act. This also explains why newly devised and totally unfamiliar new liturgies may titillate the conscious mind but cannot penetrate to the deeper levels of awareness of the worshipping community. Experimental liturgies are all right for people who have already a traditional liturgy that fulfills their basic needs for meaning and enrichment; they cannot fulfill the needs of a congregation, because the congregation will be required always to exercise its conscious mind in order to participate in a liturgy with which they are unfamiliar. One grows into a liturgical tradition by long practice and one does not always spring surprises on a worshipping community every week. To the outsider as well as to the rationally minded insider it might look like a series of meaningless and repetitive gestures. What may not transmit conscious meaning can still transmit meaning at a level at which one is not even aware

that such meaning is being received. One of the great difficulties of modern man or woman is that one's rational and conscious awareness has become so central and domineering within the consciousness, so that the pose is that one accepts only that which is rationally communicated and rationally assimilated. And yet our civilisation and the business community which dominates and exploits it all the time are fully in possession of so many ways in which they can influence our unconscious and direct our decisions. The more anti-ritual and anti-symbolic we seek to become, the more susceptible we become to these subliminal assaults on our consciousness. It is therefore important for modern men and women to get a new attunedness to the ritual or liturgical mode of meaning-communication that our unconscious will be able to receive the more benign transmissions, and be healed.

Rite and Word

Most anthropologists may not agree, but it seems clear to me that in human evolution, rite is as old as word. Human beings' earliest responses to reality were not only practical and linguistic, but also ritual. Other animals also have their own practical handling of reality (skills, instinctive or acquired), their own rudimentary language, but also rites and rituals more elaborate than that of primitive human beings. From the beginning of humanity, the three always went together, i.e. practical handling of reality, verbal conceptualization and communication, and various ritual expressions of meaning through dance, music, gestures and liturgical actions. In fact all our art forms, whether it be painting or sculpture, music or drama, dance or playing of instruments, all have their origin in the liturgical rite. But the liturgical rite, in so far as it included practical handling of material objects, and all art forms as well as words and language, could be said to have been most characteristic and most complete act of human beings from which life itself was sustained, both for the tribe and for persons and families. None of these basic forms of human expression could be separated into sacred and secular, or holy and profane. Everything was sacred, for the divine pervaded all life and all beings in the world. Gradually human beings have de-divinised all the forms of expression - skills, language and art, and made these realms secular, or exclusively

human. This has been the way alienation from the divine has functioned in human history, and the European Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries was probably the culmination process of alienation and affirmation of the human apart from and independent of the divine. It is also true that individualism comes to full fruition in the context of this alienation, where it is the secularised human person who asserts his non-dependence on God or society.

Conclusion

It is in such a secularistic, humanistic, individualistic human world of alienation that the religions of the world are called upon to carry out their vocation. In all these three processes, i.e., in secularisation, humanism and individualism, there are some positive as well as negative values. Even in the revolt against God and the human person's self-affirmation there are positive values. As in the case of the adolescent human person, there is the need to revolt against one's parents (often), in order to begin to affirm one's own adult identity. There was a need for humanity too to affirm its adult identity, and a temporary revolt against the divine as we had conceived it may have been a healthy move, in so far as the divine was understood in very immature adolescent terms by humanity. The difficulty is that the humanity which has revolted against the divine parent remains woefully adolescent and un-adult or immature. It is here that the religions have a great task in leading humanity back to a mature understanding of and relation with the divine parent. This cannot be a question of simple repentance and faith. The divine parent wants humanity to be mature and free in its relationship as adult son/daughter. A simple repentance and faith may lead humanity back to a childish or adolescent relationship to the divine.

In order to help humanity achieve true maturity and adulthood, the religions of the world themselves have to become more mature and less anti-human, less parochial and chauvinistic, less clerically dominated, less world-denying, less triumphalistic, less male-dominated; this in turn means that religions should turn to each other and also to the secular world in which human beings, both religious and non-religious, live today.

That turning, however, cannot be merely verbal or conceptual. It must be a turning in practical affairs, in thinking and understanding, and also in liturgical incorporation of practical everyday handling of reality, the deepest levels of conceptual understanding and clarification, as well as the forms of art which convey meaning to the deeper levels of human consciousness, through corporate ritual actions.

It is in the context of and for the purpose of redeeming humanity as a whole from its alienation that the religions of the world have to enter into meaningful communication with each other. It is therefore necessary that this inter-religious communication take place at all three levels:

1. Practical matters of concern to humanity like justice and peace, the abolition of poverty and misery, the enhancement of the dignity and freedom of the oppressed, and the improvement of the ecological environment.

2. Conceptual promotion of mutual understanding and respect based on that understanding among religions as well as between religions and the secular world and thirdly religions today themselves are in alienation from the divine and from I each other. We can help humanity to overcome its alienation from the divine only in the process of overcoming our own alienation from the divine and from each other as well as from the secular world.

3. At the level of artistic-ritual and liturgical communication.

Therefore inter-religious dialogue will have to attempt more than merely participating in each other's worship and liturgical ritual. We have to help each other in renewing our liturgical traditions and making them more capable of communicating trans-conceptual meaning, both to each other and to the secular world, of course primarily to the members of the liturgical community itself, but secondarily also to others.

The greatest and most communicative of all symbols created is of course humanity itself, created as the icon of God, as God's manifest presence. This humanity, both as persons and as communities, when filled with divine love, becomes easily the most significant in all

communication. When humanity, i.e., persons and communities, become love-filled, spirit-empowered, and truly enlightened at conscious and trans-conscious levels, then communication takes place almost spontaneously. But even then, the meaning of human existence is conveyed more effectively when that spontaneous communication embraces all three levels, the practical, the conceptual and the liturgical-ritual-artistic.

Beyond all these there is the communication in the most profound silence, about which it seems better to keep silent.