



New Religion for New Times: Some Reflections

Even as India grapples with the after-effects of a raging economic recession, one very positive but significant development in the country has gone markedly unnoticed. This relates to the recent declaration and signing of a 'fatwa' against terror by the 6000 odd Muslim clerics under the leadership of Darul Uloom Deoband and many other Muslim organisations. This has been done with the intent to disentangle and dissociate terror from 'Jihad'. That is a message for non-Muslims who are driven to a negativism about Islam by their misplaced identification of this faith with terror. This also sends a strong message to those of the faith who are not well up on the scriptures and, therefore, may be led into violence by the twisted reasoning of extremists who identify 'terror' with 'Jihad'.

These 6000 odd clerics also seem to have taken a conscious decision to establish counselling centres for the Muslim youths to wean them away from terrorism. This act would significantly help tackle the so-called menace of Islamic fundamentalism, if at all such a thing exists. After all, fundamentalism of any genre cannot and ought not to be logically associated with any particular religion as that goes against anything and everything that a religion stands for.

The religious fundamentalism generally stems from a confused communalism which has really been a bane of our times. Here, by communalism one means 'the tendency to associate oneself with the perceived welfare and promotion of one's community by any means', thereby enlarging the scope of communalism to also include casteism, regionalism, linguistic chauvinism and, of course, religious fundamentalism among others. It is this pathological communalism of one or the other hue which usually informs the basic contents of politics and politicking of a significant section of the political class in our country. And one really feels that unless and until one can tackle and fix this aspect of our political culture, our nation building process remains endangered, to say the least.

Today, it is religious fundamentalism of one or the other genus which is the major threat to international peace and security as well as visualised by Samuel Huntington in his 'Clash

of Civilisations' thesis. If Islamic fundamentalism within and without our country has been a major problem, then Hindu fundamentalism as a counter to the former is also no less of a problem to be fixed in time before it shapes up for uglier turns. As a country, we have been witness to the most hideous forms of religious communalism from time to time, be it during the birth of this country, in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 or in 1990, 1992, 2002 or at other times in the forms of smaller and sporadic conflagrations.

Caste, linguistic or regionalist riots have also been a routine, but cancerous fixture of our body politic which immediately needs to be surgically excised in the better interest of the health of our beloved nation. It is because of this negative, noxious and macabre quality attributed to religion that Karl Marx called 'religion as an opium of the masses' which a section of our political class has always found convenient to harness for their petty politicking as a sedative potion to numb the basic senses of hoi polloi to further their nefarious and incendiary agenda.

Philosophically speaking, it is believed by many that multiple mutants of religion germinated and grew in different parts of the world because of the fact that different societies developed in different parts of the world detached from each other. These societies desperately wanting to end the 'nasty, brutish and poor' Hobbesian state of nature needed something to regulate and regiment their daily lives with as also to explain the various questions, scruples, doubts and nature's mysteries. It is to fill this void that religion came to be developed, but owing to absence of adequate means of communications and transportations among different societies, there developed different types of religions. Hence, the existence of multiple religions in our societies. And all these religions have been playing a role since then, often larger than one ever expected them to.

Today, religion has come to suffuse and infuse the major part of human ontology, often playing larger than life roles, really unwarranted for our times. One feels that as human society is more developed now, has resolved many of nature's mysteries, overcome its many depredations and now that the means of transportations and communications have afforded us an excellent opportunity to cull out the best aspects and features of sundry world religions, the time has come to revise and modify not only the contents of religion, but also the roles it has been playing. If we don't reinvent the religion to better suit the genius of our times then, it would be sooner than later that religion, which rendered yeoman's service to humanity at different points of time, would not only prove to be a major impediment in the growth of the human society, but shall actually preside over the destruction of the same.

One really feels that religion has played enough havoc with our lives to deserve further continuance in the form in which it exists and subsists now. The sensible sections of our political class along with equally sensible sections of the religious leaders have a major role to play here. The way religion influences our day-to-day lives today, it is well-nigh impossible to uproot and extirpate it completely, but it can definitely be shaped up differently to better suit our needs. The attempts have been made in our very own country by the ilks of Gautam Buddha, Mahavira, Kabir, or other great philosophers including Bahaullah the world over, but all have succeeded partially because of one or the other reasons. In fact, all such attempts

actually helped spawn more religions than reducing and telescoping different religions into one overarching metaphysical code for the human being.

We need to rediscover the religion, if not reinvent it in the form of a more humane and humanitarian tool to allow the human society to lead a peaceful corporate life. We ought not to allow, any longer, different religions to continue competing with each other for the supremacy and greatness of one or the other, thereby creating powder keg of a situation which could ignite a major conflagration to engulf the relatively young intelligent life on this Blue Planet. One does feel that one cannot completely tear religion away from one's life because of the inability of science to provide many answers and explanations and because of the purgatory and other functional roles it plays. For example, religion has a positive role to play in the way it creates and provides various social occasions for the adherents to come together to celebrate the beauty of human life. Such functional roles are important to promote a corporate and community living as well as to exercise basic regimentation and regulation over more than necessary deviant individualism and bohemianism in human societies.

But beyond this, if we allow religion to dictate and regulate even the secular aspects of our living, then it would start playing the kind of havoc it has been playing for quite some time, hence the need for its rediscovery. One really feels that the existence of numerous religions is not advisable and healthy for our times. We can very well combine and collate the best features of different religions of this world to have a single overarching religion. It would not only banish the need for religious bigotry and incendiary fundamentalism from our midst, but would also fix the many baneful complexities associated with it. However, doing so definitely does not mean immediately removing all the culturally and socially functional features including festivals that have come to be associated with different religions. In fact, they can very well continue in their improved and sanitised adaptations as parts of the new world religion.

Salient Points

- Fundamentalism of any genre cannot and ought not to be logically associated with any particular religion.
- It is religious fundamentalism of one or the other genus which is the major threat to international peace and security.
- Karl Marx called 'religion as an opium of the masses' which a section of our political class has always found convenient to harness for their petty politicking.
- Multiple mutants of religion germinated and grew in different parts of the world.
- Today, religion has come to suffuse and infuse the major part of human ontology, often playing larger than life roles.
- If we don't reinvent the religion to better suit the genius of our times then, it would prove to be a major impediment in the growth of the human society.
- The attempts have been made by the ilks of Gautam Buddha, Mahavira, Kabir, etc. but all have succeeded partially.
- One cannot completely tear religion away from one's life because of the inability of science to provide many answers and explanations and because of the purgatory and other functional roles it plays.

- But if we allow religion to dictate and regulate even the secular aspects of our living, then it would start playing the kind of havoc.
- We can very well combine and collate the best features of different religions of this world to have a single overarching religion.

Glossary

Conflagrations: a destructive fire

Noxious: harmful

Macabre: horrible

Potion: a drink especially one having or reputed to have medicinal, poisonous, or magical powers

Nefarious: extremely wicked or villainous

Incendiary: used or adapted for setting property on fire

Cull: select

Yeoman: a petty officer in a navy

Keg: a small cask or barrel

Purgatory: any condition or place of temporary punishment

Bohemianism: the Czech language, especially as spoken in Bohemia

Bigotry: the actions, beliefs, prejudices