

**CHAPTER V**

**CONCLUSION**

**VALUES AND RELIGION: NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE**

## CONCLUSION

### VALUES AND RELIGION: NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE

In this concluding chapter, instead of merely summing up the results of the earlier chapters, I shall explore the possibility for a common ground wherein the plurality of religions can meet. However, my study here tends to be general rather than specific. Therefore, I shall not single out religions in the plural. On the contrary, my concern, firstly, will be in the context of religion as such. Secondly, the objective of my exploration is not meant to rob any religion of its specificity and unique contribution, but to view them as making for the fulfillment of a fundamental human need, transcendental though it be. In order to do this, I shall first discuss the general problem of identity and its relation to religion. I shall then pass on to belief and ritual systems, since every religion has invariably such systems. Thirdly, I shall discuss the system of symbols that a religion generally has. The purport of the above discussion is to argue out that neither at the level of doctrines nor of rituals nor of symbols, do religions meet. They can, however, meet at the level of the symbolised meaning. The symbolised meanings are a system of values that can be said to be common to all religions, since they stand for the universal values of man qua man. Hence, the title of this concluding chapter,

Values and Religion. Consistent with the spirit of the thesis, I shall keep close to the perspective of the New Testament here, too. I shall however be only selective in identifying the symbols of the New Testament. Nonetheless, it is only at this stage that the chapter may also be a synthesis of what is stated throughout the thesis.

Religion is the way to realise the supreme value of man's life called liberation, or salvation. But, in so far as religion is a historical phenomenon, it also opens up the way for man to realise a system of values, moral, social and cultural, that enrich his earthly existence and often, an existence even beyond. The great religions of the world have assigned a high place to moral conduct and to the cultivation of moral values. They have also laid utmost emphasis on the cultivation and the development of social values which are necessary for the solidarity of society and for the promotion of its well-being. Hence, it may be said that true religion does not admit any kind of polarity between the spiritual and the secular life, or between religious and secular values. They are distinct but not opposed to each other. Religion, on the one hand, opens the way for man to the Divine and, on the other, activates him to realise the other values that sustain and enrich his earthly existence. Thus religion embraces both the dimensions of man's existence,

the spiritual as well as the secular. And yet, in spite of its involvement in the secular pursuits, true religion does not lose its touch with the system of values which constitute the supreme concern of man. This is the unchanging and the everlasting truth of religion.

Against this background, values play an important role at the core of all religions, the New Testament religion not excluded. They create a harmonious relationship among values, often, in a hierarchy of their own, without any prejudices to one another. The question that I address myself to in this chapter is this: Can the New Testament values make for a harmony of all religions, in spite of their different belief and ritual systems?

### 1) Religion and Identity

Whatever other functions religion may have in the life of the individual and the communities, one important role assigned to it is that it provides a person with an individual and a corporate identity. Identity is central to all the pursuits undertaken by human beings. While at the individual level, it makes for a psychological stability, and further for a discovery of his ontic foundations, conceived either as God or Brahman or the purity of one's own pristine nature etc., at the corporate level it gives a sense of security and belonging, rootedness and direction in his

life that is basic to human existence. By providing man with a system of meanings and by enabling him to celebrate that meaning through worship, liturgy, festivals, beliefs, religious observances etc., religions sustain the life of man both at the personal and the corporate level. Lack of identity and of belonging can lead people to neuroses and schizophrenia at different levels of his being, which is often at the heart of most social evils of our time. Thus identity and its formation are important to human beings both at the individual and collective level. The formation of identity which religion is to contribute generally includes the following elements.

Firstly, religion provides man with the belief in a transcendental or divine principle, either personal or impersonal, either negative or positive. Man believes it to be the ground of his existence and meaning in life. Secondly, closely associated with his belief in a transcendental principle, there is the belief that not only his own existence but also that of the world is closely subordinated to this principle. Thirdly, religion makes man adhere to a set of different ways in which he establishes a relation with the transcendental principle; this at once makes for modes of prayer, worship and rituals. Fourthly, religion equips man with a code of conduct which he follows on the belief that it embodies the divine will. Finally, religion makes man

attach special significance to some places which he believes to be specially holy, as they are supposedly sanctified by the presence of the divine. All these elements contribute to the formation of a psychological, social and religious identity in man.

Every religion, in so far as it is a complete system of salvation, provides man with all that man looks forward in a religion and preserves its own elements of identity. The New Testament religion is not an exception here. In it too we find a set of beliefs, modes of worship and a system of values. In comparison with other religions, it may differ in beliefs and rituals; it may also differ from the set of symbols that it uses. But, when it comes to the set of values, I am inclined to believe, all religions do meet one another, because all of them advocate the same universal and absolute values that bestow significance and meaning on human life, although in different ways. To explicate my thesis I will first discuss the role and functions of religious beliefs and rituals; secondly, the importance of the system of symbols that serve as a unique mode of expression in religion.

## 2) Religious Beliefs and Rituals

Every religion contains a set of beliefs. These beliefs constitute what is known as the religious doctrine. The doctrine is thus a sum total of attitudes, either verbalized

or non-verbalized. In either case the attitudes constitute a world view. The world view may bear upon the particular conceptions of a transcendental reality, man and the world; of their interrelatedness; of the destiny of man on earth, and even beyond the terrestrial life etc. Therefore, religious beliefs are different from ordinary and scientific beliefs, in the sense that the latter are accepted or rejected on the basis of evidences. In other words, ordinary and scientific beliefs are amenable to verification. These beliefs are expressed in propositions. Hence, truth or falsity is inbuilt in them. Hence, we may say that the ordinary and scientific beliefs can change in course of time with the knowledge of new relations obtained between objects. In science, new beliefs can replace old beliefs. But, in the case of religious beliefs, the situation is different. As a matter of fact, the religious beliefs or the world view of the particular religion are relatively permanent; in a way, they do not change easily. The change of religious belief systems is tantamount to a replacement of one religion by the other. In this sense religious beliefs are persistent.

The above distinction between beliefs suggest that not all beliefs are religious. In popular discourse, belief is contrasted with knowledge; but the contrast is relative and changeable. If a belief is validated, then it becomes

knowledge. That is to say, if a belief fits into the pattern of commonly accepted facts and principles, it is said to be true. Likewise, if it fits into the pattern of scientifically accredited facts and theories, it is said to be scientific knowledge. On the contrary, religious belief influences behaviour, both personal and social. Its impact is not so much epistemological as attitudinal, for it influences one's behaviour. It is, therefore, obvious that religious beliefs cannot be distinguished from non-religious beliefs simply on the basis of truth and falsity, because one of the characteristics of religious beliefs is that they cannot be proved or disproved by scientific procedures.

We have to grant that all religions do not have the same religious beliefs. For example, in respect of their conception of reality, some believe in monism, others in polytheism, and yet others do not believe in any God. This only indicates that, though all religions have a set of beliefs, the belief systems cannot be their meeting point. There are some religions which do not believe in any supreme being or God, they are neither centered in God nor give Him any place in their particular metaphysics. Can we treat a belief system without God as religious? The answer is in the affirmative. It is true, as a matter of fact, that these religions do not entertain the idea of a personal God; nonetheless,

they may have the concept of an impersonal cosmic principle that is both a model for human conduct and also the ideal to be realized in the life of man. Likewise, the creation stories along with the type of relationship that they seek to establish between man and the transcendental reality can be treated as religious beliefs that vary considerably from religion to religion. Thus the presence of the transcendental element makes them in every sense religions; such is also the case with the millenarian ideologies, although scholars of religion are wont to call them pseudo-religions.

Consistent with this spirit, there are scholars who treat humanism and Marxism as either full fledged religions or quasi-religions, in virtue of their entertaining ideas of the flowering of the fuller human nature and of millennium etc. I, however, do not think them to be religions but only ideologies. There is a sense in which it can be said that all religions are ideologies, but not all ideologies are religions. This way both humanism and Marxism are ideologies without being religious. While humanism makes man the measure of everything, Marxism, on the other hand, seeks to interpret everything in terms of economic structure of human society, and human liberation in terms of liberation from economic oppression, and hopes for the dawn of the perfected state. We can notice here that Marxism too in the final analysis

becomes a kind of humanism. But, I am inclined to believe that a sense of 'the transcendence' and 'the beyond' is the sufficient and the necessary condition for an ideology to transform itself into a religion as well. But these concepts are permanently absent in Marxism and humanism. Therefore, they cannot be treated as religions.

Religion also contains a set of rituals, which consist in specific behaviours, actions, prayers etc. These activities become religious only when they are done in the context of the 'sacred'. For example, if certain sweets are eaten in any context, we do not consider the eating of it a religious act at all; but, if the same sweets are eaten in connection with a certain sacred ceremony, it can be considered as a religious act or ritual. The sacral context bestows on it the quality of a ritual; or it becomes the sacred action, or ritual. We can agree with Mircea Eliade that any definition of religion and the ritual should have a reference to the experience of the sacred; and consequently religion and its ritual should be related to the ideas of (ultimate) being, meaning and truth. In a similar vein, Rodolf Otto's theory, that the basis of religious consciousness is the experience of the 'Numinous', a pre-reflective and unconceptualizable experience, which contains simultaneously the feelings of fascination to and of awe of something overpowering and myste-

rious, highlights the element of an objectively experienced transcendence. For Otto the category of the numinous is identical with the 'sacred' or 'holy' minus its rational factors.

Sociologists define ritual as a rhythmic procedure, controlling a series of acts directed to the same end and repeated without variation on the appropriate occasions. The term 'same end' is important for us to consider, as it distinguishes one ritual from another. Sociologists are further not averse to incorporate the idea of the sacred in their definition of ritual. Emile Durkheim argues that the idea of sacredness is a necessary part of ritual, though he traces the origin of sacrality to the society itself. Harvey Cox understands ritual as "A dynamic symbol which could be enacted, sung, danced ... doing something for the people, moving them from one state to another".<sup>1</sup> Thus, the folding of hands, the bowing of head, the closing of eyes – a ritual so often performed in prayer – are in themselves incomplete. If these actions must be considered as rituals, they must first of all evoke meanings that are associated with our relation with the sacred. The meanings are symbolic, and are attached to the actions to make the phenomenon of ritual.

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1. Cox Harvey, The Seduction of Spirit, 1973, p. 283.

It goes without saying that the belief and ritual systems are closely interlinked. Any system of belief evolves during its course of its own system of rituals. These rituals are important for the sustenance of the system, for the belief systems, abstract in themselves, get framed in concrete actions. The rituals are the enactment or the dramatization of the beliefs. We may identify the following significant features of ritual: Firstly, ritual is the behavioural action that is necessarily associated with religious faith. Without the element of faith, the action concerned is not rooted in the sacred, the source and sustenance of ritual. Secondly, the behaviour is habitual; it is a matter of routinized action. Thirdly, the behavioural action is social: Ritual is invariably an action of, and in, social solidarity. The motivation present originally in its institution may have long disappeared; hence, a ritual may be a behaviour that continues as mere habit. Nonetheless, in its institution, it always had a significance. The significance often is couched in the word that accompanies the ritual action.

Rituals usually seek sanction from the cultural context of the group which practice them and, from a sociological point of view, are grounded in the mores, folkways, customs and habits of the group who practice them. Rituals then find an expression in the ceremonies, occasions, and events of the individuals who practice them as a manifest action of

belief in a particular social group. Often routinized habits are also described as rituals as long as the habit is performed according to the definition of rituals given above. For example, the saying of grace before meals may be a ritual to Christian; it may not have any significance to another religionist, unless perhaps he too has a similar ritual of sanctifying the food that he is to nourish his life.

All that is stated above, along with the example given above only highlights my contention that, like beliefs, rituals too are different in different religions. Beliefs and rituals are represented by different symbols. But these symbols are not only mere signs, they have in them more than what meets our eyes. To this I now turn.

### 3) Religious Symbols and Values

Paul Tillich thinks that the religious symbols are the language of religion. If the values are at the core of all religions, as we have been maintaining throughout this thesis, then religious symbols must be intricately linked with the values in different ways. Religious symbols, we are inclined to believe, not only express religious beliefs and rituals, but in addition also exhibit the value systems of their religions. Hence, religious symbols play a pivotal role in religions in the identification of the values and their interpretation.

### a) Need for Symbols in Religion

All religions make use of the system of symbols, irrespective of their being in the mainstream or otherwise of the scientific and the technological culture. Thanks to the insights of depth psychologists, we know it today better that man is largely influenced by the Unconscious. Within the structures of the unconscious and the conscious alike, Paul Tillich identifies man's ultimate concern as constituting the essence of religion. The ultimate concern of man assumes many a form, from incohere to clearly and cogently defined philosophical concepts of reality, that bestows meaning structures on man's life. If so, the language of religion may come to be symbolised, for only symbol can express the riches of the unconscious as well as the conscious. The ultimate concern often is inexpressible, only a symbol tries to express what is inexpressible, to an extent. The symbols are the ways through which religious realities, as they affect man in his depth dimensions, can express themselves, indirectly though; this is not to deny that religion can also express itself reflectively in theological, philosophical and artistic forms. But the specific medium of expression for religion has always been the symbol; religious language is symbolic.

### b) Meaning and Characteristics of Symbol

The word 'symbol' has been derived from the Greek

word 'symbolon' (from the root ballein + sym), meaning literally 'to toss together'. In Greek, a 'symbolon' was a 'tally', that is, each of two pieces of an object that the two contracting parties tossed and broke between them as a token of their contract. Each party keeps his piece in order to have a proof of the identity of the person presenting the other piece. The one piece had to fit into the other (hence, 'tally'). A symbol is therefore to be presumed to resemble what it represents. But this resemblance will be apparent only to those who are in the knowledge of the situation in which symbol is being used. For example, if we are entirely ignorant of the Hindu tradition and its philosophy of the pranava, we would not be able to read any meaning in the sacred symbol of Om. But once we are familiar with the context of the sacred symbol Om (it could be the context of a prayer, a ritual, a belief or even the scripture), its religious meaning is obvious to us as representing the ultimate reality. Likewise the symbol of a cross as the redeeming love of God in the Christian context.

According to Paul Tillich, the characteristics of symbols are as follows:

The first and the most fundamental character of symbol is that it points beyond itself to something else. Symbol points to something which cannot be grasped directly, but

only indirectly. Therefore, all symbols are representative in character. Thus symbol has a presentative being but a representative meaning. In this sense, it is akin to sign, though there are qualitative differences between the two.

Secondly, the symbolic material is taken from the finite reality, indeed from the items of our day to day experience. In spite of their finite presentative appearance, their functions are representative, in the sense that symbols point beyond themselves to the ultimate reality. In so far as they stand for something other than themselves, they are similar to signs. Symbols are similar to signs in one decisive respect: "Both symbols and signs point beyond themselves to something else".<sup>2</sup> Thus, for example, red light at the traffic is a sign which points beyond itself, i.e. to the necessity of vehicles stopping. Therefore, every symbol points beyond itself to a reality for which it stands. And yet, there is an important difference between symbols and sign that we must not ignore. Tillich himself clarifies the difference: "Signs do not participate in the reality of that to which they point, while symbols do"<sup>3</sup> (emphasis is mine). This leads us to the consideration of the third characteristic of symbols.

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2. Tillich, P. "The Nature of Religious Language", in God, Man and Religion, ed. by K.E. Yandell, p. 389.

3. Tillich, P. Dynamic of Faith, p. 42.

Thirdly, symbols participate in that to which they point. In other words, the symbol participates in the symbolised. For example, at the level of one's national or political life, a flag participates in the power and glory of the nation of which it is the flag. Hence, a disrespect shown to the flag is deemed to be an attack on the nation itself that is represented thereby. Likewise, at the level of one's religious life, a sacrificial altar or an icon participates in the sanctity and power of the religious reality itself. This is so because the symbol participates in the reality that it symbolizes. It radiates the power and meaning of that for which it stands. Signs, on the other hand, though similar to symbols in their representative function, do not participate in the reality and power of that to which they point.<sup>4</sup>

Fourthly, religious symbols cannot be created at will, in the sense that symbols are not produced intentionally. They are not the matter of expediency, as signs are. Therefore, metaphorically it can be said that like living beings they are born, they grow and, finally, they die. They come to birth when the situation is ripe for them. They become obsolete and gradually fade away, when the situation becomes unfavourable for them. The use of the symbol of king, for

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4. Tillich, P. God, Man and Religion, op.cit., pp. 389-90.

example, in religion grew in a special period of history characterized by the institution of monarchy; but it dies in most part of the world in our own times, which are characterized by parliamentary democracies. Symbols die, when they no longer evoke the response in the group where they originally found expression. If so, it follows that one symbol cannot be replaced by another symbol at our will. Every symbol has special function; hence, it cannot be replaced by other symbols. Nevertheless, new symbols may emerge to meet new situations in human life. But, the signs can always be replaced. If one finds, for example, that a green light is not so expedient as a blue light, then, we put a blue light at the corner of the street, and nothing is changed as the traffic is concerned.

If the religious symbols are not created at one's will, the question arises: out of what womb are the symbols born? Tillich's reply would be: out of the womb which is usually called today as the "group unconscious" or the "collective unconscious".<sup>5</sup> Symbols grow out of the unconscious, individual or collective; and they cannot function without being accepted by the unconscious dimension of our being. Symbols which have deeply felt emotional functions, such as religious and political symbols, are created by the collec-

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5. Ibid., p. 392.

tive unconscious of the group in which they appear. They are not created intentionally, and even if somebody were to invent a symbol, then, it would become so only when the unconscious of the group says "yes" to it. This implies that, in the moment at which this inner situation of the human group to a symbol has ceased to exist, the symbol too dies. Thus in religions, when the situation, in which the polytheistic gods appeared, changed, their symbols too died.<sup>6</sup> All this only goes to indicate that symbols are deeply rooted in some primordial, either physical or psychological or spiritual, needs of human nature.

The fifth characteristic of symbol is its power for opening up the dimensions of both the subjective and the objective reality. It,

"unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality. A great play gives not only a new vision of the human scene, but it also opens up the hidden depths of our own being. Thus, we are able to receive what the play reveals to us in reality. There are within us the dimensions of which we cannot become aware except through symbols as melodies and rhythms in music."<sup>7</sup>

Thus every symbol opens up a level of reality for which non-symbolic speaking is inadequate. Tillich applies his insights

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6. Tillich, P. "Symbols of Faith" in Philosophy of Religion, ed. Abernethy and others, p. 358.

7. Tillich, P. Dynamic of Faith, pp. 42-43.

first of all to artistic symbols before he extends them to the sphere of religion. The more we try to enter into the meaning of artistic symbols, the more we become aware that it is a function of art to open up levels of reality; in poetry and music as well, levels of reality are opened up which cannot be opened up in any other way. Tillich suggests that, in order to open up the levels of reality, something else must be opened up at the levels of our "soul", or the levels of our interior reality. The opening up of the levels of soul corresponds to the levels in exterior reality, which are opened up by an artistic symbol. Thus every symbol is two-edged: It opens up the objective reality, and it opens up the soul, or the subjective reality. This is in a very special way true of the religious symbols.

Religious symbols too are ciphers that need to be deciphered. Its decipherment consists in the manner in which they lay bare aspects of the religious reality. A total comprehension here is fraught with impossibility; nonetheless, an apprehension of something of the riches of the religious reality is legitimately sought by man. However, this 'revelation' is only to the extent that the human soul itself opens up in its layers of consciousness to the religious reality. Thus in revealing aspects of the nature of religious reality, man himself stands transparent before that reality. All this

is made possible by way of the function of the symbols in the life of the religious man.

Finally, a characteristic of symbols is their integrating as well as their disintegrating power. We need to be aware of this opposing dimensions of the symbols. History of religions gives endless examples for the elevating, quieting and stabilizing power of religious symbols. One can thus speak of the healing power of religious symbols. But, in contrast to their integrating function, symbols can also have disintegrating effects as well. They may cause restlessness, depression, anxiety etc. In other words, symbols can have both creative and destructive effects on social groups; they have tremendous power of creation as well as destruction. They are by no means harmless semantic expressions.

In view of all that is stated above in respect of symbols, we can now proceed to identify some of the basic symbols of the New Testament. Having identified them, we should be in a position to reflect on the values symbolised thereby, and thereupon examine if there should be a scope for the meeting of the religions on the level of the New Testament values.

#### 4) New Testament Synthesis

In trying to identify in the New Testament the reli-

gious symbols and their meanings, we cannot ignore the implications of values therein. For what is symbolized in the set of symbols is nothing other than the system of values universally significant for human life. Therefore the New Testament symbols either directly or indirectly try to explicate the values inherent in the New Testament religion.

Religious symbols of the New Testament identify certain values. This is one way of bringing the values closer to the life of common man. It first of all, proceeds at the level of understanding before they are incorporated in the actual living. Hence, values are made intelligible by way of symbols drawn from man's day-to-day life that have a paradigmatic, therefore universal, significance. Secondly, the mysteries of religion are explicated for the sake of bringing out the simple truths of religion by way of symbolical language. For this purpose Christ uses the parables, metaphors, ethical discourses and even proverbs, that were hallowed by the age-old culture of the milieu. In all these literary genres that are used, his purpose is to communicate the values of the new religion that he propounds. Therefore, religious symbols of the New Testament convey religious values at a level which common people could both understand and integrate in their lives. This symbolic language is not devoid of its theological and philosophical insight and, yet, the latter

are not the purport of Jesus' teaching. It is at this level of the meaning of symbols, which are identical with the values perennial to human life, that the New Testament religion may be said to constitute a common platform with other religions. What then are the prominent symbols of the New Testament?

One of the important symbols in the New Testament, that has become an external sign of Christian religion, is the cross; literally cross is the gibbet on which Christ was crucified. Symbolically however cross has become the instrument of human salvation. The symbol of the cross, since the death of Christ on it, has grown and lived in the hearts of millions of Christians. What was originally a symbol of shame reserved for a criminal has since then transformed itself into a symbol of divine love and forgiveness, manifested through the sufferings and death of Christ on it for the redemption of the whole world. Hence, cross now is the symbol of a sacrificial love. Seeing the cross, the Christian himself is reminded of God's love for man, that commissions his only begotten son to lay down his life for the sins of man. It is this theological perception that is shared by John in his Gospel:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life".

(John, 3:16)

Christ's sacrificial death on the cross does not merely connote a liberation from sin; it also positively serves as a symbol of hope for an eternal life. Both the liberation from sin and the salvation unto eternal life are symbolized by the cross. This symbol thus becomes so important that it becomes an integral part of the Christian life. In a sense, it constitutes the meeting point of divinity and humanity in the person of Christ. Hence, it stands for love, forgiveness, compassion, peace and hope for a new life. Now, it needs be emphatically stated that these are the values that are dear to the heart of man in any religion, whatever be their theological interpretation. Indeed, they are the values that enrich the quality of human life, and every religion may be said to be concerned seriously with them. They may be differently symbolized in other religions, but the values themselves symbolized therein are of universal significance to human life, even when a concept of a personal God may be said to be absent in the religion concerned. Even an atheistic, but humanistic, ethics of Mahāyāna religion may be said to capture the spirit of these values in its concept of the great compassion (karuṇā).

Moreover, the cross for the Christian is not only a symbol of divine love and redemption, but also what enriches his spiritual life by way of identifying the values of self-

denial and the renunciation from one's own narrow self. It is against this backdrop that we should read the meaning in the words of Jesus addressed to his disciples:

"If anyone would come after me, he must take up his cross and follow me".

(Math. 16:24)

The call to 'take up the cross' is identical to a Christian with the value of self-denial and self-sacrifice. Renunciation of the interests of the narrow self is in the New Testament spoken of as the 'death to the self'. For through self-renunciation is sought God-realisation in the New Testament religion. An aspect of this important value is captured by the notion of surrender to the will of God. It demands therefore humility and total commitment to God, that St. Paul speaks of as the kenosis, or the spiritual self-emptying. The urge for God-realisation by self-renunciation is the value recommended by Christ himself to his followers. Thus cross in its variegated aspects becomes a necessary constituent of the Christian life. It may now be added that the significance of self-denial as a value is spoken of by all other religions, too. In Hinduism, in particular, the relinquishment of the empirical self, understood as ahamkara, is a repeated theme in the spiritual disciplines advocated by different schools of religio-philosophical thought. It would make no difference to them, irrespective of their belief in a God

or otherwise. The realization of the transcendental Self or nirvana or vaikuntha or moksa or kaivalya is said to result, only when the individual is totally freed of the empirical self. Thus, the value of self-denial is incorporated in the heart of the spiritual disciplines of every religion.

Another set of important symbols, that operate in the New Testament, both in the Gospels and in the formation of early Christian theology in the hands of St. Paul, is that of Adam and Christ. By this symbol is sought to be clarified the contrast between the natural and the spiritual man, or more specifically, death on account of sin and the new life in the spirit. St. Paul puts it graphically:

"Just as the result of one trespass (Adam) was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness (Christ) was justification that brings life for all men, for just as through the disobedience of one man (Adam) many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man (Christ) many will be made righteous".

(Romans, 5:18-19)

The natural man, or man's sinful nature, is symbolized by Adam, the symbolical first man. Likewise the spiritual man, or the glorified human nature, is symbolized by Christ, symbolically the second Adam. The first Adam inherits for man through his disobedience, or sin condemnation. The second Adam or Christ, however, by his act of obedience, or righteousness effects for man justification and eternal life.

In Christ man sees the hope of glory that is to realize within himself. Whereas the set of symbols of Adam and Christ is specific to Christian philosophy and theology, what is symbolized thereby viz. man's passage from death to glory, or from the natural 'sinful' state to a supernatural glorified new life, is a theme that is common to all religions. They often conceive of a limited state of man, that is restricted to the world of beginningless ignorance (maya-avidya), contraction and restlessness (samsara), that is to give way for an existence of expanded infinite consciousness. They seek a passage from finitude to a new state of life, characterized by the totality of being, fully blossomed consciousness and complete bliss (sat-cit-ananda). The finite state is the state of death, but the infinite state is that of new life. The new life need not necessarily mean the acquisition of a new achievement, but only a realization of the pristine pure nature of the soul. Nonetheless, the movement is always a passage from non-being, from darkness to light, from death to immortality.

Closely associated with the value of passage from death to new life is the symbolism, in the New Testament, of baptism, that stands for a spiritual purification of man. Through the external ritual of washing man has always felt the need for an inner purification of his mind and heart.

Thus the value of purification of the heart is a common expectation of all religions.

In the New Testament religion, the word baptizo has a long history of its own that goes back to what the Jews had made of it in the Old Testament. In the Mosaic laws of purification (Exodus, 30:17-21, Leviticus, 11:25), it means a washing, or cleansing, that comes by way of repentance of one's sins. Thus, we see that John's baptism is clearly proclaimed to be a baptism of repentance. Its validity was acknowledged by Christ himself submitting at the hands of John to this baptism of repentance as a preparation for his public ministry, although Christian theology has always held that Jesus did not stand in need of it. Later on, Jesus himself institutes his own baptism of the spirit (Luke, 3:16; John, 1:26). Both the baptism of John and Jesus alike are probably best understood as an adaptation of the Jewish ritual of washing, which was primarily a baptism of repentance. This clearly stands out in the following statements.

"He went into all the country around Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins".

(Luke, 3:3)

"I baptize you with water for repentance".

(Math., 3:11)

St. Paul adds a new dimension to the meaning of baptism.

He associates it with not only the remission of sins (Acts, 2:38), but also with man's union with Christ (Galatians, 3:26-27). This union is of the nature of identification with Christ in his death to sin and resurrection to new life (Romans, 6:3-5); and with becoming a member of the body of Christ (I Corinthians, 12:13). St. Paul clearly asserts:

"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the death through the glory of the father, we too may live a new life".

(Romans, 6:4)

The theme that baptism is not an event but a process is uppermost in the thoughts of St. Paul. According to him, dying with Christ was not a single event of the past; identification with Christ in his sufferings and death is a life-long process (Romans, 6:5). So it may be said that Paul thought of baptism as the continuing symbol of Christian existence, while the spirit denoted the new life in Christ.

The early Christians lived with the conviction that baptism as a symbolical act had effected in them a new life according to the spirit. Therefore, its memory was a constant 'appeal to God for a clear conscience'. This is expressly stated as under:

"Water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also - not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God".

(I Peter, 3:21)

What is more, the cleansing, that the early Christians spoke about, was seen as a universal need of all men without distinction between Jesus and the non-Jews alike:

"He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith".

(Acts, 15:9)

Again,

"Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he (Christ) is pure".

(I John, 3:3)

It is through this act of purification and repentance that a believer is said to live the new life in Christ.

Similarly, in other religions too, the concern for a purification of the self, mind and heart (atma-suddhi, citta-suddhi, pasāda) is something that we meet every now and then. Their symbols may not be the same, but their meaning of purification is universal. For example, in the case of Hindu religion, taking bath in the holy rivers on special occasions is at once to seek purification of the outer and the inner man alike. On other occasions, the purification is sought through the symbols of fasting, penance and prayers. Here too the symbolized meaning is man's vital concern for self-purification.

There are a series of symbols in the New Testament that stand for a vital concern in its religion. Such symbols are those of 'washing of the feet', of 'the good samaritan', of 'the little child' etc. - all symbolizing the value of service rendered in simplicity by man to his fellow being. This value of service, technically known in the New Testament as 'Ministry', is of universal significance to man, and is taught in one way or other by every religion.

The Christian calling is not only a command for living a new life of the spirit for one's own well-being, it is also a demand for serving, or ministering to the needs of his fellow men. Christ is explicit in his statement to the Apostles that he, even being the Master, came to this world not to be served unto but to serve. As if to concretize the truth of his statement, he symbolically washed the feet of his disciples and, thereafter, commanded them to put into practice the principle of service to one another. The fuller implication of his teaching on service however was not always grasped by his disciples. When James and John wanted to know what position they would be given in his kingdom, he forthrightly said:

"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be the first must be a slave of all".

(Mark, 10:43-44)

The ministry in the life of Christ himself was service to mankind in different forms that are at once social and religious. The Gospels assert that he went about preaching and teaching, consoling and healing. His life was a mission of service to others with love, compassion and self-sacrifice (Galatians, 5:13). The spirit of service has manifestly become an important characteristic of the New Testament religion. In addition to his examples in his own life, he made the theme of service central to his teaching. Many are the parables that he employed to put across the message of service. Of them the parable of the good Samaritan has a vibrant force in this religion of contemplation overflowing into action. The fact that service is an action, issuing forth from contemplation, calls for a greater degree of humility and simplicity symbolized by the child:

"Whoever humbles himself like this child  
is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven".

(Matth., 18:4)

This, again, demands a total surrender and commitment to God.

All religions of the world, in one form or the other, do preach the value of service in the spirit of humility, simplicity, surrender and commitment; emphasis however may vary. Hinduism may capture the value of service to one's

fellow man as service to God. Buddhism may capture the same value in the practice of the virtues of brahmavihāras, within which the universal love (mettā) and the great compassion (karunā) have touched the heart of man across cultures and countries. It is a moot point how the values concerned came to be unfolded, or even forced to occupy a back seat, in the actual historical development of a given religion. What I want to emphasize here is the availability of the value of service in the centre of a spiritual tradition that a religion is. It may be variably symbolized but its meaning bearing upon the value is one and universal in the religious traditions of mankind.

Finally, there is the great symbol of trinity at the heart of New Testament religion. Indeed, it is the symbol that bestows on Christianity a specific character, distinct from all other religions, including its own source of Jewish faith. I tend to see in this great symbol a significant social model for the human solidarity and community. The value of social solidarity is of a fundamental significance to any religion, in so far as a religion is a way of life not only for an individual in his isolation but also in his mutual relationship with his fellow beings. It gives him not only his individual but also social identity.

To the New Testament God is the trinity of persons,

Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. In spite of their distinctiveness as persons, they co-exist eternally in a relationship of absolute equality and reciprocity. Christian philosophers and theologians may have employed the available philosophical categories for explaining the doctrine of trinity, however inadequate they may be for grasping his experience of God as a perfect community. The mystery of trinity affirms not merely the oneness of the divine nature, but also within it the full and perfect communion of the divine persons. The Christians believe that the trinity ought to be a prototype for the human society. The model society should be one that affirms unmistakably, after the model of trinity, personal individuality but social solidarity. Society is what, while safeguarding personal individuality, makes for human beings living in communion and collaboration with one another as equals and yet, dependent on one another.

This idea is captured by St. Paul in his doctrine of the mystical body of Christ:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one spirit to drink".

(I Corinthians, 12:12-13)

Again,

"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it".

(I Corinthians, 12:27)

Having captured this fundamental insight, St. Paul declares that we, as human beings, are members of one another. Mankind constitutes the great human 'body-society', a 'corporation', the church, whose head is the Christ. The church thus has come to symbolize the fellowship of mankind, through the great symbol of trinity itself.

The value of fellowship, whether we understand it purely socially or religiously, is an important human value. All religions incorporate it in the centre of their teachings. They may capture it by symbols, very different from the one that are operative in Christianity. But the symbolized value is the same, namely the ultimate oneness, or the fellowship, of the entire mankind. Christian religion may have the symbols of the trinity, 'the communion of saints', the Church etc. Hinduism may have the symbols of Brahman being sat, cit and ananda; or puruṣottama qualified by cit and acit; or the ultimate reality as Siva-Śakti; or Viṣṇu as Śrī and Nārāyaṇa etc. Many indeed are the symbols. Buddhism may have the symbol of the trikāyas. The Gītā may capture it in the concept of the great common-weal of lokasaṃgraha. Nonetheless,

they all harp on the essential unity of mankind through these symbols. This is a value that is sorely needed to be highlighted in our modern society, that more often than usual is divided by dissensions and divisions, conflicts and conflagrations on the slight pretext of differences in symbols, that really do not matter.

In conclusion, it is the common ground of the value systems on which the plurality of religions can meaningfully meet. Religions have their own belief, ritual, and symbol systems. They derive their specificity from the above sources in so far as they are different in different religions, but only at the level of the symbolized meanings which constitute the value systems they may be said to touch upon the essential human predicament in a unique way. Therefore, these values of the religions have a perennial significance. The New Testament synthesis presented in this chapter is only a modest attempt at a perspective to explore the possibilities of religions coming together for the benefit of man. Religion is a quest. It is a quest after meaning and significance of life and the world. In course of the search, man visualizes his relationship with the transcendent. Accordingly, many a religion have come into existence. In a sense, it can be said that man seeks to express himself in form of religion. Religion in this sense can be treated as a form of expression,

a form of life (to use Wittgenstein's terminology). Further, the religious quest has given rise to values. In short, there is no religion without values. A value free religion is a myth. Thus, it proves that human existence cannot be understood without reference to values. A purely positivistic understanding of human existence, is impossible only in this sense. Seen in this light, it turns out that values constitute the core of religions. If this thesis is accepted it rules out religious conflicts. So, it can be said that one religion is not superior to another and various religions are different ways or forms of life. Christianity is one form of life, Hinduism is another, and Islam is still another, so on and so forth. Viewed from this standpoint religions lead to fellowship and not to confrontation and conflict.

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