

RADHAKRISHNAN ON RELIGIOUS HARMONY AND SOCIAL ETHOS

POOJA VYAS

I

In philosophical tradition of India, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan has a great place among modern Indian thinkers like, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Iqbal etc. He is considered as a great intellectual teacher of philosophy and religion. The root meaning of religion as we understand the word, is 'binding force'. But, in the world, many religions exist and each religion claims that its scripture is unique and its God is superior to other Gods. So, because of their claims of perfection and absoluteness there has been a change in the real meaning of religion. Now the general attitude of religious people is to think that the one religion is opposed to another. But the reality is that no one can claim to perfection and absoluteness about his religion and think derogatively about other religions. Radhakrishnan emphasises this when he opines that “Religion should not be confused with fixed intellectual conceptions, which are all mind-made. Any religion which claims finality or absoluteness, desires to impose its own opinions on the rest of the world, and to civilise other people after its own standards.”

It has always been an uphill task to define religion. Religion, according to Radhakrishnan, is discipline and practice not theology. It touches the inner core of man and creates the power of conscience to understand difference between good and evil, right and wrong, moral and nonmoral values. It gives us power to escape from greed, lust, hatred and non-ethical acts. It discovers the essential power in human being to unite his relation with spirituality or ultimate reality of this world. Religion helps us to change ourselves in our personal and interpersonal lives. It helps us in resolving the conflicts which exist in our own nature and diminish the hateful feelings. It always increases the feeling of love and morality in our life. The true religion always generates the feeling of likeness to divinity or spirituality. Religion is the bridge between God and man and its function is to unite them. All religious practices like meditation, worship etc. are disciplines which purify the mind. It does not only help in developing an insight to see the reality but it helps us in direct experience of reality with the help of religious insight. We can perceive the divinity

and identify ourselves with it through religious discipline. Radhakrishnan, in his famous book *Religion and Society*, says that 'The religious man transcends the limitations imposed on him by his material nature or social conditions, and enlarges the creative purpose. Religion is a dynamic process, a renewed effort of the creative impulse working through exceptional individuals and seeking to uplift mankind to a new level'.

Religion is identified with feeling, emotion, sentiment, instinct and faith. The aim of religion is to provide spiritual fulfillment to all the individuals. Religious experience does not create conflict or disturbance in the human life; it brings peace in this world. Radhakrishnan uses the word 'Shanti' for it. He defines it as 'A positive feeling of calm and confidence, joy and strength in the midst of adversity and defeat, loss and frustration'. Now the question arises why this experience is called religious and what is peculiar in it in comparison with other experiences? It is called religious because it is a sort of inner satisfaction and has the capacity of realizing spirituality. It discovers eternal truth. Its peculiarity we can see in its effort to discover the life-spirit that unites individuality with higher levels of its own being. Radhakrishnan says that, 'However much we may quarrel about implication of this kind of experience, we cannot question the actuality of this experience itself. Religious experience has the capacity to diminish the sense of separation and discover the feeling of love and harmony. He says that men are not divided on the basis of religion but many times conflict is the cause of this division. He says that the aim of true religion is spiritual fulfillment. It can be realized when we understand the inner forms of religion or the essence of religion through religious experience. He also says that conflicts take place in our life when we apprehend outer forms of religion without religious experience.

Religion, according to Radhakrishnan, is identified with higher instinct, reason and love. It has deep faith in morality. It is way of life. "Religion signifies faith in absolute values and way of life to realize them... Religious faith gives us the passion to persevere in the way of life and if it declines obedience degenerates into habit and slowly withers away". Different religions, according to Radhakrishnan, are different expressions or modes of one truth. Every religion is the mode of human effort in the direction of spirituality. They all prepare us for struggle and encourage us to achieve the supreme goal of life. In his own words, "the different religions should

be regarded comrades in joint enterprise in facing common problems of peaceful co-existence of the peoples, international welfare and justice, racial equality and political independence of all peoples. Different religions are to be used as building stones for development of a human culture in which the adherents of different religions may be fraternally united as the children of one supreme". The true religion is not polluted by creeds, dogmas, caste, colour or superstitions. But if this is so, the question arises what is the main cause of the religious differences and how it vitiated true religion? For Radhakrishnan what vitiated the religion was the conflict itself though it cannot affect the essence of true religion. Conflicts are the main cause of religious differences. Conflicts and differences disappear when we begin to think that all religions are the expressions of one truth that is ultimate reality.

II

Radhakrishnan in *The Hindu View of Life* opines: 'the differences among the sects of the Hindus are more or less on the surface, and the Hindu as such remains a distinct cultural unit, with a common history, a common literature and a common civilization'. Hinduism has universalistic approach in this sense. It is not bound up with a creed or a book, a prophet or a founder: Hinduism always searches for truth. In Hinduism there is no end of prophecy and no limits of religious scripture. It always welcomes new experiences and new expressions of truth. 'Hinduism has no common creed and its system of worship has no fixed form. It has bound together multitudinous sects and devotion into a common scheme'.

Hinduism is a practical religion because it is a way of life. It gives liberty to every individual to enjoy any code or practice. It never insists on religious action but it always insists on spiritual and ethical approach in life of every individual. Hindu way of life always gave emphasis on moral life and the fellowship for all who accept the law of right and seek for the truth. Hinduism has rationalistic approach. It studies the facts of human life in scientific spirit. But Hinduism is not only to study the facts but also try to obtain victory over facts. 'Religion is not so much a revelation to be attained by us in faith as an effort to unveil the deepest layers of man's piety and get into enduring contact with them'.

There is a distinction between the Sanskrit term *Dharma* and the English word 'Religion'. *Dharma* has got a worldwide connotation; it is not confined to any religious sect or community, but, is meant for the welfare of the entire universe. Lord Shri Krishna in the *Gita* tells His disciple, Arjun that he has to fight for the establishment of the kingdom of 'Dharma' (*Dharma Rajya Sthapna*), by defeating the Kaurvas, the symbols of the undivine forces 'Abhudaya and Parmarth, Preyas and Shreyas' have been the guiding principles of the Indian thinkers. Vedvyasa, the celebrated Seer of the *Mahabharata* tells us in so many words that *Dharma* alone prevails, and nothing else. Manu and other thinkers have also like-wise supported this ideology. 'Religion' on the other hand confines itself to binding oneself to the supreme self, the God, the Father in Heaven. Jesus Christ propagated this theory and His numerous followers all over the world follow this in Toto, the *Old and New Testament* uphold throughout, this relationship. This amply proves that the word Religion for the Westerner means accepting the essence of God. It is purely a theistic approach, a dualistic approach. But Radhkrishnan bases his religious Harmony Theory on the celebrated theory of Indian Philosophy, the Vedantic Philosophy, Shankara's Advaita Philosophy. For him, religion in India is deeply rooted in the concept of the non dualistic philosophy, *Kevaladawita Vedanta*. This theory of the reality underlines the fundamental unity of the entire universe. The *Brhamasutra* tells us that only the *Brahma* is Real and the phenomenal world is relatively not that real, '*Brahama Sataym, Jagan Mithya, Jeevo Brahmaiva Naparha*'. Radhkrishnan insists on the hierarchy of the religious experiences. For him, the experience of the Absolute is ultimate (*Nirguna –Nirakar*). In his own words," The worshipers of the Absolute are the highest in rank, second to them are the worshipers of the Personal God (*Nirguna-Sakar*); then come the worshipers of the incarnations like Ram Krishna, Buddha (*Saguna – Sakar*); below them are those who worship ancestors ,deities and the lowest of all are the worshipers of the petty forces and the spirits". (*An Idealistic View of Life*, p. 32) Thus, Radhkrishnan's concept of *Dharma* is very clear. For him, *Dharma* means the direct experience of the Divine; this is the most important aspect of *Dharma* and then come the concepts of social wellbeing of the entire universe (*Loksangraha and sarvabhuthita* as propounded by the *Gita*).

It may be pointed out here that for the sake of convenience, Radhakrishnan uses the word religion, though for him religion is always *Dharma* and not Religion as prevalent in the West. At the same time, I would like to make it clear that Radhakrishnan makes a distinction between religious experience, on the one hand, and integral experience, on the other. This standpoint will also help us in understanding Radhakrishnan's distinction between Religion and Religions. For him, the term Religions represents the various interpretations of experience, while integral experience is the essence of all religions. To quote his most significant words, "If experience is the Soul of religion, expression is the body through which it fulfills its destiny. We have the spiritual facts and their interpretations by which they are communicated to others." (Indian View of Life, page 90). In a different context, Radhakrishnan says, it is the distinction between immediacy and thought. Intuitions abide, while interpretations change." (*An Idealistic View of Life*), but this interpretation should not be confused with the experiences themselves. For Radhakrishnan, conceptual experiences are tentative and provisional..., because the intellectual accountsare constructed theories of experience (*Idealistic View of Life*) and he cautions us to 'distinguish between the immediate experience or the intuition, which might conceivably be infallible and the interpretation which is mixed up with it.

For Radhakrishnan, the creeds and theological formulations of religion are only the intellectual representations and symbols of experience. The idea of God, according to Radhakrishnan, is an interpretation of experience. (*Indian View of Life*, p.186). It follows here religious experiences are, for him, context - relative and therefore imperfect. They are informed by experiences through specific cultural, historical, linguistic and religious angles. Because of their conceptuality and subsequent intellectualization, experiences in the religious sphere are limited. It is in this sense that we may refer to experiences, which occur under the auspices of one or other of the religions as 'religious experiences'.

Radhakrishnan emphatically asserts that religious intuition is a unique form of experience. Religious intuitions are more than simply the confluence of the cognitive, aesthetic and ethical sides of life. However, vital and significant these sides of life may be, they are but partial and fragmented constituents of a greater whole, a

whole which is experience in its fullness and immediacy and religious intuition. In fact, he is firm in his conviction that religious intuition is not only an autonomous, form of experience, but a form of experience, which informs and validates all spheres of life and experience. Philosophical, artistic, and ethical values of truth beauty and goodness are not known through the senses or by reason. Rather, they are apprehended by intuition or faith (*Indian View of Life* p. 199). Thus, Radhakrishnan maintains that religious intuition informs conjoins and transcends an otherwise fragmentary consciousness.

Radhakrishnan's interpretation of religious intuition lies in his affirmation of the identity of the Self and Ultimate Reality. Throughout his life, Radhakrishnan interpreted the '*Upnishdic Mahavakya tattvamasi*', as a declaration of the non-dualilty-Advait (of *Atman and Brahman*), Advaitic interpretation of the ultimate reality prompts him to accept the non dualistic experience of religious intuition. He not only claimed to find support for his views in the Upanishads, but believed that correctly understood, the ancient sages expounded his interpretation of religious intuition. Concluding, Radhakrishnan says, 'Here we find the essence of religion, which is the synthetic realization of life, the religious man has the knowledge that everything is significant, the feeling that there is harmony underneath the conflicts and the power to realize the significant and the harmony.'*(Indian View of Life* p. 201)

According to me, Radhakrishnan identified intuition- in all its contextual varieties- with integral experience. The two expressions are for him, synonymous- integral experience co-ordinates and synthesize the range of life's experiences. It furnishes the individual with an ever deepening awareness of and appreciation for the unity of reality. As an intuition integral experience is not only the basis of all experience but sources of all creative activities, whether they are philosophical, scientific moral, artistic or religious.

Religious Harmony – Radhakrishnan explains the concept of the Religious Harmony on the basis of his notion of the essential unity of all religions. The question arises here what is that common element that every religion shares? Radhakrishnan replies, Religion is not a creed or a code but an insight into reality.*(My Search for Truth* p. 27). This insight reveals that man is always confronted with something greater than

himself, which is known as the eternal or the absolute reality. It is present in the soul of every man and forms the bridge between finite and the infinite, and consequently an insight into this Truth constitutes the essence of Religion. Hence, Radhakrishnan says that religion is that discipline or way of life which, enables man to, 'make a change in his own nature to let the divine in him manifest himself.

Religious harmony depends on a true understanding of the nature of religion and also expects the seeker of the Truth to have a faith in the ultimacy of absolute spiritual values and a way of life to realize them. In this context, we must understand that this faith involves an awareness of the beyond, and therefore a conviction that such awareness is possible. That is why, great religions have often been prophetic, have been based on Truth realized or experienced by gifted Seers. That is the reason behind Radhakrishnan's insistence on making the concept of religious harmony, based on the true understanding of religion and religious experience, essential for applying the social ethics to the practical life.

Religious Harmony in Theory and Practice- If we analyze Radhakrishnan's concept of religious Harmony, we find that there are two aspects of this theory – one is theoretical and the other is practical, in fact, both are interrelated. The theoretical aspects depends on a deep understanding of religion, religious experience and direct realization of the Ultimate Reality; thus, it is metaphysical and spiritual both. On the other, the practical aspect insists on respecting all religions and developing the feeling of tolerance. Explaining it further, he says, "The differences among religions seem prominent, because we do not seem to know the basic truth of our own religions. There is a common element in all."

At another, place Radhakrishnan writes, 'the different religions are like partners in a quest for the same objective' (*East and West*, p. 29). Radhakrishnan has tried to explain the concept of religious harmony and unity on the basis of the etymological meaning of the word 'Religion,' also as is well known, the term Religion comes out of two words-'re' and 'legere'. Here the word 're' means again and 'legere' means to bind together. Thus, the term 'Religion' means to bind again; it is amply clear from this etymology that the word Religion expresses the element of unity.

Usually, all religions accept God to be the centre of devotion. As a matter of fact, God is the basis of different religions. Some eminent learned philosophers like, Radhakrishnan have gone a step ahead and declared that the concept of religious unity depends on the essential unity of the highest Self. Establishing the fundamental unity of all religions, Radhakrishnan says, 'The spiritual glory of Hinduism, the faithful obedience of the Jews, the artistic life of the greek seekers, the theory of great compassion of the Buddhist religion, the lesson of God- Love of the Christianity and the self dedication of the individual to the creator-, the Islamic ideal all lead us to the same goal of multifaceted perfection of the mankind.' (*Fragments of a Confession in the Philosophy of Radhakrishnan*, edited by P. Schippl, p.76).

Religious Harmony and the Present Man- The Ideal of attaining religious harmony on the universal plane, has become easier now because of the scientific progress and the acceptance of the ideal of Globalization. The world has come nearer today because of the scientific growth but this is only one side of the picture, the other side of the picture is very dark and gloomy. There is a keen contest and in fact cut throat competition between the countries and individuals, in this sense man has become narrower in his outlook and self -centered as also ego -centric. And here we feel the need of religious understanding, religious harmony and the essential unity of all religions.

Religious Harmony and Social Ethics- It's a well known fact that the individual and society are complementary to each other and their day to day behavior needs a moral, religious and spiritual control. Without these, man becomes animal- like and falls a prey to his passions and basic needs, he loses the hold over his senses and acts in a very confused way, which is damaging for the progress of the individual and society both. All the thinkers, right from the days of the Veda to the present times, have been insisting on practicing a rigorous discipline in order to make society, morally healthier and religiously and spiritually more sound.

III

The *Mahabharata*, says, 'The *Veda* is one; its significance is one, though different *Vedas* are constructed on account of misunderstanding. The acceptance of common authority by the different sects helps to purify them. Those parts of the new

faith which are not in conformity with the Vedic canon tend to be subordinated and gradually dropped out. While no creeds and no scruples were forced to disappear as outworn or out of date, every one of them developed on account of influence of the spirit of the Vedanta, which is by no means sectarian".

So, the Hindu method of religious reform is basically democratic because it permits each faith to get the truth through its own ways. Each group has its own historical tradition and change, the condition of its growth of spirit. Toleration is the most basic tenet of universalism which is accepted by Hinduism. Hinduism does not refuse any religious belief. For example, Christian's description of personal, immediate dogmatic faith in Jesus and His authority as God is self-certifying. "Christian theology becomes relevant for those who shared and accepted a particular kind of spiritual experience, and these are tempted to dismiss as illusory other experience and scriptures as imperfect'. But Hinduism was not betrayed into this situation. The Hindu thinker readily admits other points of view than his own considering them to be just as worthy of attention. If the whole race of man, in every land, of every colour, and every stage of culture, is the offspring of God, then we must admit that, in the vast compass of his providence, all are being trained by his wisdom and supported by his love to reach within the limits of their power a knowledge of the Supreme".

Radhakrishnan knows about criticism of Christian missionaries against Hindu beliefs and religious practices. With deep and clear religious sense, he removes all criticisms. He says that all such criticisms are due to the lack of understanding. He says we can completely remove them by the understanding of true religion, because only it can stop the complete annihilation of human race. So there is need to understand the true meaning of religion to every individual of world. Let me end with some thoughts of Vivekananda. He says: 'Religion without philosophy runs into superstition; and philosophy without religion becomes a dry atheism'. He further says that, 'In every religion there are three parts: philosophy, mythology and rituals. Philosophy of course is the essence of every religion; mythology explains and illustrates it by means of more or less legendary lives of great men, stories and fables of wonderful things and ritual gives to that philosophy a still more concrete form so that everyone may grasp it. Ritual is in fact a 'concretized philosophy'

Every religion has its own philosophy which is unique to itself and which enables it to differentiate it from the other religions. But the question is if each religion differs from the other at its most basic philosophical level, how can it be possible to have one universal philosophy? Moreover, it is also observed that each one claims superiority on others in a very rigid manner. Sometimes the people say those who do not follow his religion, cannot attain salvation. They must go in hell because their way is not the true and right one. Each religion brings out its own doctrines and insists upon them as being the only true ones. And not only does it do that, but it thinks that he who does not believe in them must go to some horrible place. We must first of all know that we all are human beings and that we are not equal. We are not equal in our physical strength because one man is stronger than other, some have more power and some have less power and some are men and some women. There are many differences between us. But along with these differences we have one element which is common in all of us. We all are human beings; we all belong to one humanity. This is the true nature of religious harmony and social ethos.

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