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Religion, Ethics and Development – Method and Metamorphosis

V. Basil HANS¹

Abstract

Much has been written about the socio-cultural functions of religion. It is equally important to discuss the role and impact of religion and ethics on development and promoting reform in civil society. In today's South Asian context it is necessary to analyse religion both as a tradition and a representation of modernity. Otherwise it is difficult to clearly understand not only the relationship of domination-subordination, together with processes of exclusions and violence prevalent in the sub-continent but also the emerging perspectives, lineages and languages of sociology in general and religion in particular. An attempt is made in this paper to examine the relationship and to evaluate the processes in the evolving discourse of sociology. It also analyses the 'moral' as embedded in religion and as an autonomous category emerging with secularisation. The subtleties of rights and righteousness in the method and metamorphosis of development are also dealt with in this paper.

Keywords:

Development, ethics, religion, secular, sociology

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Introduction

In Sociology the field of Religious Studies engages perennial questions about religion and human society. It investigates religions and how they shape and are shaped by human cultures. Religious study when undertaken with an interdisciplinary approach exposes students not only to different sources, problems, and methodologies in the study of religion but also to the role and impact of religion and ethics on development and promoting reform in civil society. Today what attracts students and researchers to this field is the interdisciplinary approach to the study of religion, including those that are historical, philosophical, theological, sociological, economic, political, environmental and even literary-critical. The interests of such students/researchers may be descriptive, explanatory or normative. At the farther end of such an exercise is the possibility of harmonising intellectual (may be sometimes surreal) goals that are frequently conceived as quite different, or even intrinsically opposed. This is what for instance comparative religious ethics in a complicated scholarly endeavour is trying to do (Stalnaker, 2005). In today's South Asian context conversations about religion need to go beyond crusades and conversions to cover civil society's role and responsibilities in dismantling erroneous premises that put amity and prosperity in danger, despite retaining words and worships of religion. It is imperative that in the current scenario of turmoil the text and context of religions be re-read and interpreted to strengthen the edifices of democracy and development, much so in a multi-religious society with a blend of cultures like that of India. It is therefore, necessary to analyse religion both in traditional and modern perspectives if we are to arrive at the relationships of factors that determine or deter its functions. An attempt therefore, is made here to examine the relationship between religion, ethics and development along with the subtleties of rights and righteousness in the method and metamorphosis of development.

Religion and ethics role and relationship

Organised religions are man-made, primarily for the purpose of regulating his social activities. While religion followed by a person in principle is supposed to be a faith – for enhancing her moral and

spiritual values – it is also expected that it make life wholesome and productive by fostering new knowledge for social transformation and economic development (Gopalan, 1984). Religion thus, is more than faith-following. It is simply impossible to integrate mankind productively if religion is not practised perfectly. Religion as some say gives an experience of elevation, spiritually and personally. But to sustain the experience with a firm footing on the ground, to shun superstitions, violence, fanaticism, and disrespect for the ‘other’, needs a belief of the highest order. In modern times even technology is used to practice intolerance and crude behaviour in the name of religion and culture. While there is virtual integration of communities across mores and shores, and when a borderless state is a possibility, the lack of communal harmony which is derailing “socially acceptable development” is a tragedy. Even some of the religious leaders and institutions have been mute witnesses (supporters?) of these retrogressive steps of the ‘modern’ man. Religious aspirations of mankind have been rudely shaken by events of fundamentalism, terrorism and communalism and fundamentalism.

Never has the question of social integration raised such a wide range of emotions as in the present times with incidents of communal clashes recurring as frequently as famines and famines or power cuts in India. (Ballal, 2000; Hans, 2007). As Dr. S. Radhakrishnan the philosopher – statesman of India wrote,

“We have grown in knowledge and intelligence, but not in wisdom and virtue. For lack of the latter, things are interlocked in perpetual strife. Religion has been, hitherto used for fostering wisdom and virtue. But drift from religious belief has gone much too far, and the margin of safety has become dangerously small. The social pathos of this age has been exploited by countless individuals in different parts of the world, who pose as leaders, and proclaim their foolishness as wisdom. We are sowing grain and weeds at random”.²

In the light of the drift from religious faith in the modern age (or the dynamics of our times) one can be equipped with perceptive mind not just by knowledge accumulation and critical thinking but also by value-orientation. This calls for a careful examination of the

² See S. Radhakrishna, *Recovery of Faith*, 1967.

interrelationship of 'religion' and 'ethics', which has much to do with the building of character for the making of good citizens with rational thinking – the economic man.

Religion is difficult to define. There are historical religions with numerous sects and beliefs. What is common is that the beliefs are results of free thinking (Santinatha, 1987). 'The word 'religion' is from the Latin word religio or religare, meaning "to bind again", Therefore, religion may be defined as that which binds human beings to one another and integrates them all to, even more inclusive, the ultimate reality. While influencing powerfully, our character, quality of life, living style and our world-view, religion constitutes the conceptual, emotional and practical characteristics. The experience of mankind is that religion involves his Jnana (intellect), Bhakti (feeling) and Karma (will). Essentially therefore, there are two relationships: a binding between man and the transcendent reality (vertical relationship) and a link of man with his neighbour and nature (horizontal relationship) (Daniel, 1984). But the two are not separate relationships, just as 'matter' and 'spirit' are by no means discreet entities but different facets of one whole, or in other words, different levels of vibrations in the endless energetic fluctuations of Being. 'Being' is a whole which is in constant change and flux (Esler, 2007) and thus, the relationships become functional. Religion is, thus, a structured expression of human quest to establish and maintain relationships with the Divine along with the human and the Cosmic without losing the perceived distinctive identity of any but at the same time enabling continued transformation of all in an integral manner (Chackalackal, 2007). The foundational and functional experiences when accepted in a uniform manner become the kernel of religion: faith expression, in words and deeds. This is where ethics enters.

The word 'Ethics' is derived from the Greek word 'ethos' and a related word 'morality' from the Latin words 'mos' or 'moris'. Whereas morals refer to the behaviour of individuals and societies according to the traditional and prevalent customs, ethics is a praxiological reflection on these customs: "why" I out to do, what I ought to do. It builds social ethics, which coupled with religion, invites a person who is basically a social being, to reflect upon the responsible activity of man towards God, the ground of our being, and his neighbour and nature. Reflection without action is incomplete. Praxis is, in fact, the mode of contextual

theology. It is critical reflection on the situation of bondage and action directed towards changing it. The contextual liberative model of ethics is praxis. It provides for a vision of well-being (Shalom or Kingdom of God, as in the Bible) and people are called to be participants in the process of transformation of the world towards that goal (Daniel, 1984; Abraham, 1996). Godliness and neighbourliness come together in the interpretation of the sacred and the secular.

The moral, as autonomous category, emerges only with the secularisation, first of learning, then of society more generally. Majority of sociologists and historians hold the view that the causes of secularisation are social, not intellectual (Mounce, 1991). Perhaps, one way of protecting a religion from the onslaught of the ‘enlightened’ was to brand them as secular (secular= worldly) as against the spiritual. Actually one cannot be realised without the other; that is there cannot be spiritual without the secular, and vice versa, as they assume more of a complementary nature than that of contradictions. While the former asserts the need of responses from the human founded on divine authority, faith and the values derived therefrom, the latter insists on reinstating the role of reason and human values (Chackalackal, 2007).

In the modern use of the term secular, the sphere of secular is considered to be distinct from the religious. But the moral is so connected with the religious as to derive from it something of its point or meaning. As Plato and Aristotle found the interlocking of elements into a whole we may also state that moral value is real because it reflects objective order which itself reflects its transcendent source (Chackalackal, 2007; Mounce, 1991). The sociological discourses should strongly grasp these nuances and the complexities of the religious dimensions as it interfaces with modernity, to be concerned with the way religiosity, ethnicity and communalism are defining everyday practices and lives of people of South Asia and dividing them. This is not because religion was historically and everywhere the source of morality, law, science etc, but it has become a process of knowledge and meaning construction (Patel, 2007).³

Social life, thus, has been the common matrix in which both ethical and religious tendencies were initiated. Therefore, principally

³ See T.N. Madan, *Images of the World: Essays on Religion, Secularism and Culture*, Oxford, Delhi, 2006

religion should take the initiative to assert that the secular is not all an extrinsic aspect, but an intrinsic dimension to religion which would make it more integral and holistic and enables it to be a catalyst in human development and social ethos (Daniel, 1984; Chackalackal, 2007). This last dimension is today the lost dimension that has to be redeemed because from sociology it permeates into the domain of economics the art of household management, too. The questions, of caste, class, culture, market in the era of globalisation must be addressed and modernity must handle them with care, and religion can help. For instance, the popular Indian socioeconomic discourse today seems to be not fully familiar with the emerging phenomenon of ‘social capital’ – an area of study where culture and economics confluence. Francis Fukuyama, the author of *Trust* has captured culture as the “20 per cent missing element” of economics. He says that as contrasted with individualism-dominated societies, relation-based societies generate culturally defined social capital. Some feel, therefore, that traditional caste, by reorienting itself is handling modernity well and that modernity is clueless as to how to handle caste. They call for promoting the economic potential of caste (Gurumurthy, 2009). More research is needed to substantiate this. What cannot be denied is that both social progress and economic development require supportive values, namely pluralism, tolerance, free flow of ideas and information, including religious and ethical. Upholding human rights and dignity, giving knowledge and creating jobs are therefore as noble tasks as providing food to the hungry as religious and spiritual leaders have been doing at various places [as President Pratibha Patil put it, the *Sri Siddaganga Math* is known for *Vidya Danam* and *Anna Danam* (knowledge removes ignorance and food banishes hunger)].^{4 5}

⁴ The President in her inaugural speech in the three-day “*Siddaganga Shivakumara Sami Birthday Celebration*” at Tumkur on February 02, 2009. Tumkur is a district of Karnataka, one the states of India.

⁵ In Sanskrit, *vidya danam* means charity of education, and *anna danam* means charity of food (Note: *vidya* = education; *anna* = rice/food).

Dilemmas and Development

With the waves of marketisation sweeping the world, defending the religious tenets and moral values has become a daunting task. Disguised unemployment and open unemployment (the fall-out of global meltdown) are challenges to social progress and sustainable economic development. Terrorism – biological, political – can be viewed as perversion of religion. The borderless economic fundamentalism is a new entry into the political economic literature. It is a concentrated expression of communal politics, acting against economic liberalism, division of labour and economic welfare. Hatred between sects and religious groups as also communal violence has led to displacement of labour, unwarranted exodus of people, unemployment and poverty. Communal frenzy puts work ethics in disarray. The right and the wrong approach to one's work constitute the ethics of work. Indifference to one's own work or that of others is unethical. *Bandh* (closure) and other disruptions to work are wrong attitudes to work and are counter-productive to development.

The concept of bread labour is not found in the blood lost by a labourer in violent acts. The loss of productive resources in such incidents shows how little one understands the Godman-nature relationship (Hans, 2007; Swaminathan, 1984). Breeding insecurity is inhuman. As human beings are the means and end of economic development, we cannot diverse the roles of religion and ethics even in the trend of commodification. The gospel needed today is of world vision and unity, for all religions and ideologies post love as the ultimate moral law of human perfection and, a community of love with its harmony is the final goal of human and cosmic relationships. But it is admitted that some kind of self-alienation makes perfection difficult and corruption of power and authority inevitable. Therefore, while keeping love as the essence of humaneness and, therefore, the criterion and goal of all human endeavour, human society today has to eschew utopianism and organise itself as power-structures based on a sense of moral law of structural justice. It can even utilise the coercive legal sanctions of the state to preserve social peace and economic justice in the society. This calls for rational inter-faith discourse at least as the basic framework given the plurality of religious and secular faiths, in various places,

including schools/colleges and workplaces. This is quite challenging because we have to work towards allowing faith-communities to keep their identities while interacting with other religious/ideological groups. Renewal of distinctive cultural traditions will also be required (Thomas, 1998). If we succeed then it would be heaven on earth. What suits, India therefore, is democratic secularism, not a common denial of belief in a transcendent religious ultimate but making a secularist ideology the established “religion” of the common life. Also this sense of respect to different faiths or equality of religions will not come in the way of the freedom to profess, practice and propagate religion as a fundamental right (Thomas, 1998). Then the practice of ‘religion’ would not be confined to churches, temples, mosques and other places of worship. This clear expression of human rights will determine also the strength of our polity and the future of sociology.

Development Direction

Rebuilding communities of development has to be carried on for change. Reconstruction is ever-present in the process of development. Fighting communalism is a contribution to socio-economic development as it helps overcome the forces undermining unity in society – resistances to co-operation, and justice. This has to be done on two planks: intra-community and inter-community relations. Every believer then becomes a builder of nation through faith and communication, not fanaticism and confrontation. In a pluralistic society, the model of development has to be inclusive and sustainable. It is rights-driven human development. It is a composite approach to tackle both social and economic problems of the society. In such a society there is also a formed system of interdependence of individuals as well as of institutions, wherein the livelihood, rights and justice of each person is interwoven with that of all. This countervailing tendency enables moderation and generates means of inclusion. For this the representative democracy/development would need to become participative democracy/development in action. This is the much needed shift from welfare approach to the empowerment approach. Essentially this means not just a rearrangement of power and rights. It is also a change of values

and imbibing a culture of equity and practising it continuously (Hans, 2007; Hans, 2008).

Conclusion

Religiosity and loyalty can go together for social transformation and economic change. Economic development needs social integration and religious harmony. A re-engineering of theories and renewed focus of practices to appreciate the intellectual, religious and spiritual values is essential. Education too has to play a proactive role (Hans, 2007). As we say, “all are the children of God” so why not treat every person as a child of God, and help him/her blossom in his/her social space and economic sphere? Economic interdependency will be fruitful if religious principles are applied without scope for hatred and violence. Development without discrimination has to be the watchword. So we all need to practice good and global neighbourhood policy.

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