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ETHICS AND RELIGION

Dr. Kalyani Sarangi
Lecturer, Gop College, Odisha .

ABSTRACT:

Philosophers are not only engaged themselves in making armchair speculations rather they analyse and make attempts to understand different concepts that are significant in individual life as well as in collective life. Down the memory, metaphysics or First Philosophy (the earlier name) was given priority in almost all philosophical deliberations. At that time, ethics was treated only as a peripheral subject of study. Further, Aristotle's definition "man is a rational animal" elevates the status of man from an animal.

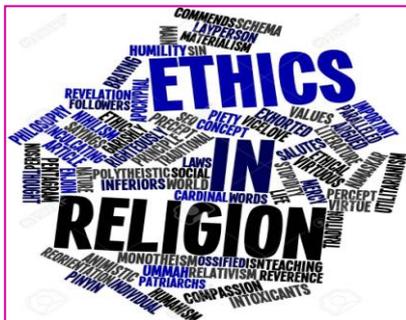
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INTRODUCTION

As the time proceeds, change occurs according to the priorities and preferences of human beings. Humanity, today, is passing through a phase of crisis. It is a crisis of value. The crisis has its genesis not in the outer nature but in the very psyche of man. It is man's own making. The different ethico-socio-religious issues like intolerance, increasing violence, clashes between different religious communities, terrorism etc draw the attention of moralists and philosophers to find out where we went wrong. To be ethical is as much natural for man as it is for him to be rational. He is not only moral but also rational and spiritual. His possession of rationality makes him uniquely different from other non-human animals as a conscious and self conscious being that chooses one out of the many alternative ends. Further, different alternative ends presuppose that there are different alternative means. It is the reason that enables one to have the sense of 'ends' and 'means' and rightness or wrongness of 'ends' and 'means'. Therefore, human action is the result of reasoned choice. This is how man remains accountable for his choices. In the same line of thought, Existential thinkers point out that man is condemned to be free and having made a choice, one stands responsible for what follows. Ethics not only helps us to choose means and ends but also concerned with questions like good or bad, right or wrong, vice or virtue. As Raphael puts it

"Moral philosophy is philosophical inquiry about norms or values, about ideas of right and wrong, good and bad, what should and should not be done."¹

But the irony is that the study of ethics or the knowledge of the ethical principles does not make a man necessarily moral. There is no guarantee that the study of ethics must regulate human conduct. On the other hand, a man may lead a genuine moral life without studying ethics or without the knowledge of the ethical principles. It is needless to say that the study of ethics has a bearing on our moral life. But a theory or a principle draws its strength from its practical implications. Therefore, ethics when applied also helps to solve problems of practical life. It also guides our conduct and paves the way for 'justified violations' of ethical principles on appropriate occasions. Ethics is thus a social affair and is essentially a matter of



community concern. Therefore, ethics and values were appropriate to ancient times and will continue to hold good for the days to come. Corliss Lamont, in recognition of its significance, says

“Economic and political systems will come and go, nations, empires and civilizations rise and fall, but ethics and values, as a philosophic system in which mankind’s interests upon this earth are the first word and the last word is unlikely to become obsolete.”²

Here, the million dollar question is: Why man is ethical at all? Why at all man prefers to follow the path of reason? The only answer would be that ethics and values alone bring harmony and happiness in individual and collective life. Socio-economic equality, political unity, democratic tendencies and obeisance of rights and duties can be brought only by the Ideas of ethics and values. Ethics and values together lay the foundation for sustainability and continuance. Though they are used synonymously, they are different too. Ethics as a discipline identifies good or evil, just or unjust, fair or unfair practices about moral duty in comparison with the one established by a group or institution or culture where as value refers to the belief or the set of beliefs based on which an individual makes judgments in his life.

RELIGION

Religion is as old as human civilization. It is one of the oldest human institutions. Religious urge is innate. It is intimately bound up with human thinking and living and its aim is to make life meaningful in more than one way.

“Religion is that set of beliefs or institutions, behaviours and emotions which binds human beings to something beyond their individual selves and fosters in its adherents a sense of humility and gratitude that, in turn, sets the tone of one’s worldview and requires certain behavioural dispositions relative to that which transcends personal interest.”³

It is a conscious effort of establishing a social order based on love, fellowship, service and sacrifice. But to our surprise, there is mutual hatred, animosity, dissension and violence in the name of religion so much so that a person tends to think that the world, perhaps, would have been a better place without religion than it is with so many religions. One religion appears to be remarkably different from another regarding their mode of worship, beliefs and practices. Despite differences and superficial features among all religions, if one looks deep down, it is evident that they stand on a common platform to achieve a common goal. The main objective of all religions is to help people, to lead them in a particular way to understand and realize their ultimate goal. It provides a picture about one’s place in the larger scheme of things, creates a sense of connectivity and it makes one feel grateful.

It is a fact that very often we confuse between these two areas of human activity and experience, i.e. ethics and religion. Who influences whom has been a much debated topic among moral philosophers and religious thinkers. There are thinkers who maintain that ethics/ morality act as a crusader otherwise religion would become a body of dogmas or superstitions. Therefore, morality is the focal concern of every religion. Morality lays down the golden rules for the followers of different religions to walk on the path despite their individual differences. Further, morality implies certain metaphysical outlook like the Creator, the existence of the individual selves and so on. On the other hand, some Christian thinkers, the Bhagvad Gita and Nyaya philosophers treat God as the dispenser of justice. God is the moral governor. He awards the moral agents with rewards or punishments according to their deserts. It is further got its sanction in the philosophy of Kant. According to Kant, Freedom of Will, Self and God are the three postulates of morality without which morality cannot be conceived of. Man can never be moral without believing in God. The influence of religion on morality cannot be completely ruled out because it is religion which gives objectivity to ethical values. Religion connects a person with a larger worldview and creates an absolute and unflinching loyalty which is beyond time and clime. This loyalty makes the person distinctively spiritual and creates a sense of humility in him. Religion not only moulds the outward behavior of the individual but also gives shape and enriches our culture. Therefore, it is impossible to think of Western culture without Jews and Christian influences, India without Hinduism and Asia without Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. To support any one view is one-sided only. The best way is to understand their proper relation is through

interdependence. Religion is the ideal ground of morality and morality is the outward manifestation of religion in our social relations. Morality reacts upon religion, refines and purifies it. Religion reacts upon morality, inspires and elevates it. Morality rationalizes religion and is best interpreted, understood and practiced in a religious mode of living. Similarly, religion realizes morality in a higher order of existence. This is how **religious ethics** is brought into focus by moralists and religious thinkers to make life and the world better for everyone and everything that exists.

RELIGIOUS ETHICS

Religious ethics is concerned with the meaning, merits and validity of religion for the lives of humans and non-human animals and the ordering of societies and eco-systems. It addresses the problems of good life, justice and the common good and set the standards for what is and is not acceptable behavior. The fundamental principles of different religions flow from the core beliefs, traditions, culture and are of the nature of universal principles. They are in the form of Golden Rules. These rules command people to go beyond their own selfishness and self-absorbed isolation in identifying with different life forms, flora and fauna. One can develop the sense of seeing oneself in others and others in oneself. The maxim of Kant also says that

“So act as to treat humanity whether in thine own person or in that of any other, always as an end and never as a means only.”⁴

Man is essentially rational and this rational nature makes him an end in himself. Further, Kant maintains that “Treat your neighbours as you would treat to yourself,” Every human being has to be treated on equal footing. One should act as a member of the moral community in such a manner that it becomes a universal law. The Upanisads hold that the inner kingdom is the basis of his own empire. Moreover, the same moral principle is variously stated in various religions. In different Upanisads it is said that Truth is one but spoken differently by different seers. (*Ekam Satyam, bahudah badanti*). Religiously inspired ethics came in a variety of forms and expressions. Above all, there are commonalities of interests among all religions like issues of good life, justice, social welfare, life and life beyond and so on. Blackburn states that there are those who

“would say that we can only flourish under the umbrella of a strong social order, cemented by common adherence to a particular religious tradition,”⁵

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the ethical components of some of the major religions of the world and to see how it solves the human problems and also paves the way for Humanitarian ethics.

HINDUISM

Hinduism is the oldest living religion of the world, professed and practiced in Indian soil for more than seven millennia. Hindu ethics goes back to ancient times with *Aryan* invasions of North India which were chronologically parallel to the Hellenic invasions of Greece (c.2000-100). The culture of these conquering tribes was in sharp contrast to that of the declining Indus civilization. Not long after their occupation of the Gangetic pastures, the *Aryans* commenced their speculative activities which issued in the formation of the *Vedas*. The *Vedas* and the *Upanisads* are all linked with the ethical, cosmic and divine life of human beings.

The ancient Indian seers recognized a cosmic order that is immanent in nature as the foundation of their ethics and values. They called it *Rta*, a concept which Macdonell, an eminent historian, has described as:

“The highest flight of *Rg-Vedic* thought.”⁶

Causal uniformities (found in the state of nature) and the moral order (found in the domain of action) are variant expressions of *Rta*. When one acts in accordance with the cosmic order it is termed as righteousness (dharma) and when one thinks and speaks in conformity with the cosmic order, it is called truth (satya). Gradually the cosmic sense of *Rta* as Natural Law developed into the social sense of *Rta* as Moral Law. The nature of this development was crucial for the status of morality. It meant that virtue was

given the same immanent position in the social world. So great was the influence of *Rta* that in later time its principles were perpetuated through the characteristic Hindu concepts of *dharma* and the law of *karma*.

Ethics of the Hindus draws its strength from their worldview. The world is pervaded by Brahman. Everything in this world is the expression of this One and Ultimate Brahman. The concept of cosmic fraternity (*vasudeiva kutumbakam*) is the ethical paradigm, implied by this cosmo-centric ontology. Therefore, in *Isa Upanisad*, it is said that

“I (know that) all this, whatever moves in this moving world, is enveloped by God. Therefore find your enjoyment in renunciation; do not covet what belongs to others”⁷

Hinduism gives importance on the ethics of renunciation rather than acquisition. It underlines the importance of self effort and the grace of God. One has to cultivate fourfold practices (*sadhana chatustaya*) in his personal life. Besides these, there must be an earnest longing for liberation (*mumuksutva*). *Shravana* (listening), *manana* (reflection on the acquired truths) and *nididhyasana* (sustained meditation on the received truths) are recommended for a smooth transition from finite to infinite, from knowing to being. Further, four fundamental values (Doctrine of *purusarthas*) the individual has to imbibe in letter and spirit for his steady progress in the journey to the cherished goal. An ethical life in Hinduism is essential for a liberated life, one without craving, one that is content, attained through knowledge. *Dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksa* constitute the four integral components of the value schemata. Both *kama* and *artha* are to be regulated by *dharma*, so that one attains *moksa*, the highest *purusartha*. Further, *Bhagvad-Gita* has universal message which is of social relevance and will always remain relevant for all times to come. C.D. Sharma emphasizes:

“*Bhagvad-Gita* represents a unique synthesis of action, devotion and knowledge. Man is a complex of intellect, will and emotion; he is a being who thinks, wills and feels. Intellect has given rise to philosophy of knowledge; will to the philosophy of action and emotion to the philosophy of devotion.”⁸

That is why the synthesis of knowledge, action and devotion (*jnana-karma-bhakti samuchaya*) is mooted as the most potent way to liberation.

JAINISM

Jainism is one of the ancient religions of the world. It is a religion without God. As an articulated system of faith, it is traced back to Vardhamana who is known as Mahavira (Great Hero). Jainism emerged as a reaction against the Vedic orthodoxy which lost its purity in the midst of casteism, animal sacrifice and meaningless formalism. Jaina ethics admits bondage or liberation as one's own making. The highest state can be attained only by pursuing the path of *triratna* (three jewels) i.e. right faith (*samyak darshana*), right knowledge (*samyak jnana*) and right conduct (*samyak charitra*).

Right faith is the prerequisite for right knowledge. In Jainism, faith means unperturbed trust in the principles given by the tirthankaras and truths contained in the scriptures. Right knowledge, for *Jainas*, prompts one to embrace a life conducive to the attainment of *moksa*. Knowledge proper consists in the discriminative knowledge between living and non-living (*jiva* and *ajiva*). Through the practice of penance, one acquires right knowledge by which all the karmic dross are worn out. Further, faith and knowledge culminates in conduct (*charitra*). Jainism prescribes strict austerities both external and internal. Along with this, one has to practice five Vows *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (celibacy) and *aparigraha* (non-possession) in letter and spirit.

Jaina ethics revolves around the concept of *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* has to be practiced in thought, word and deed. “The practice of *ahimsa* in *Jainism* fosters an attitude of respect for all life-forms. Due to this perception of the world, *Jainas* hold an affinity for the ideals of the environmental movement. Practice of truth consists in thinking, speaking and acting in a manner which doesn't cause injury to another. The observance of truthfulness prompts an investigation of the interrelatedness of things. The vow of not stealing can be used to reflect on the world's limited resources and prompts one to think of the needs of future generations. Sexual restraint might help to minimize population growth. The discipline of non-possession gives one pause to think twice before indulging in the acquisition of material goods.”⁹

BUDDHISM

Buddhism was a reformation movement of the 6th century B. C. It came as a reaction against polytheism, ritualism, casteism of the Vedic tradition. The philosophy of Buddhism is one of the eminent philosophies by which the entire world has been emancipated. The thought of ethics and values of Buddhism was tempered with reason. God doesn't find a place in Buddhist framework. Therefore, there is an attempt to shift the centre from the worship of God to the service of man. It is not God-centric but human-centric. Buddhist religion would insist on an inward change of heart and make the system of self culture or effort (*atma dipah*) significant. Radhakrishnan says:

"Buddha does not liberate men, but he teaches them how to liberate themselves as he was liberated himself."¹⁰

Buddha was convinced of the four Noble Truths and advises people to avoid both the extremes of self-indulgence and self-abnegation and to follow the middle path (*majjhima nikaya*) marked by practicality and reason. Men are under the grip of the vicious cycle of birth and rebirth (*punarapi janamam, punarapi maranam*) because of their ignorance about the four Noble Truths. Buddha has made an appeal to the men who were longing for a way of escape, to resort to *Nirvana*, where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary at rest. One can grow into the state of perfection, become an *arhat* through right conduct (*Sila*), concentration (*Samadhi*) and knowledge (*Prajna*). They constitute the three jewels (*triratna*) of Buddhist ethics. The eight fold path enjoined by Buddha is the middle path. Middle path way of life, four Noble Truths, the tripitakas and the three practices depicted the Buddha's teachings which are relied upon humanistic philosophy. Radhakamal Mukharjee says that:

"Buddhism has shown not only a marked spirit of socialism and humanitarian service for the have-nots but also forbearances, mutual accommodation and co-existence in several regimes and cultures in Asia without reference to its remarkable organizational power."¹¹

It represented a progressive world outlook for social equality and a better life for the oppressed people. Dale Riepe says:

"Buddhism is humanistic since it believes in the ability of the individual to achieve ethical goals in this world without non-human aid."¹²

The thought and utterance of threefold submission (*saranas*) constitutes the core of Buddhist ethics. They are *Buddham saranam gachhami, Dhammam saranam gachhami* and *Samgham saranam gachhami*. Besides this, *Panchaseela* also outlines the core ethical principles in Buddhism. Respect for life is the dominant overtone of Buddhist ethics. According to Buddha, knowledge of dharma is the way to *nirvana*. The highest goal of life is to attain enlightened consciousness (*bodhichitta*). This is expressed in fourfold values, namely, *maître* (amity), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (happiness) and *upekkha* (equanimity) known as *Brahma Vihara*. All these together form the very basis of social cohesion which springs from the deepest sense of love or empathy and is a state of happiness which further gives rise to a state of indifference, a state of equipoise.

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is the largest religion of the world in terms of its followers. It is essentially a religion of love and service. It has its roots in the basic tenets of Judaism. God is infinite love. He loves all, be they sinful or virtuous. He loves us irrespective of what we are. Love implies forgiveness and this is exemplified in the supreme sacrifice of Jesus.

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."¹³

Love generates the urge to serve with humility. Service to humanity is service to God. The best way to please the Father is to love and serve the fellowmen as one's own kindred. On the day of judgement, Lord takes into account all the Samaritan acts of the persons who are redeemed.

Christian ethics also discourages accumulation of wealth beyond necessity and obsession for material prosperity. One need to have only as much as one needs in order to live a life of righteousness and work to acquire only the kind of riches that enable him to live in the heavenly abode.

“Do not store riches for yourself, here on earth where moths and rusts destroy and rubbers break in and steal instead store the riches for yourselves in heaven where moths and rusts do not destroy.”¹⁴

CONCLUSION

Plurality of religion is inevitable because of the different worldviews of the propounders, human problems and social issues and how it is handled by the contemporaries in a language. So understanding the true essence of religion is the call of the hour. Enough negative emotions manifested in hatred, terrorism, fundamentalism, communal riots, blood baths have been committed by the people of different religious denominations in the name of religion. Now the time has come for soul searching. The message is universal, the core values are same. Every religion is essentially a movement to arouse goodness in people, sensitise them about the distinction between sacred and secular, pleasurable and preferable etc. Religions are nothing but different paths adopted by the followers, deliberate efforts to achieve the singular mission of establishing a social order based on love, fellowship, service and sacrifice. Man is not only emotional and spiritual but at the same time rational.

To conclude, we can say that religion has to be founded on morality; but morality cannot and need not be founded on religion at all. There is a danger of intolerance and communal feelings if religion becomes the sole foundation for morality.

“If we can briefly characterize morality in this world as not harming or killing others and generally trying to make life and the world better for everyone and everything that exists, and if many human beings do not accept the existence of a supernatural world and yet act as morally as anyone who does, then there must be some attributes other than religious belief that are necessary for one to be moral. Although it is obvious that most religions contain ethical systems, it is not true that all ethical systems are religiously based; therefore, there is no necessary connection between morality and religion. The very fact that completely nonreligious people can evolve significant and consistent ethical systems is proof of this.”¹⁵

The problem would be more difficult when we consider that people who believe there is no God or Supernatural Being (atheist) or people who are not sure (agnostics) are essentially excluded from moral consideration. They are automatically excluded from the moral sphere created by the ethics of religion. This is injustice to the nonreligious people. The conflicts can be resolved by going beyond any particular religion’s ethical system and used some sort of reason oriented broader ethical systems that cuts across both religious and nonreligious lines. Our aim is to establish a moral society, a moral world. Irrespective of all the differences that exist among religions and between religionists and no religionists, attempts should be made to create a wider based morality that allows these differences and individual religious relationship to continue and grow, while at the same time allowing for ethical attitudes and actions for all concerned. This will open up a new vista for both religion and morality where humans will be the sole judge.

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