
UNIT 15 RELIGIOUS HARMONY

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15.1 INTRODUCTION

All religions in the world teach love and tolerance but yet it is not very uncommon to hear violence and bloodshed in the name of religion. The tension in Israel and Palestine between Jews and Muslims, in Ireland between Catholics and Protestants, in India the inter-community discord and ensuing conflicts pose serious questions before us. Does religion talk about harmony or intolerance? To find answer to this in Indian context we need to deliberate on the spirit of religious tolerance visible in our historical tradition and the religious philosophy of great Indian thinkers. It is important to understand that in a pluralistic society like ours inter-religious tolerance and cooperation are crucial for the survival of nation. In the contemporary world when people of different religious traditions have decided to make a country of their choice as their home the spirit of religious tolerance is essential to avoid inter-religious tensions and conflicts. In this unit we will begin with the meaning of religion and then we will explain in historical context how the different religions prevailing in India strongly believe in reverence for human life and preach tolerance towards the believers of other religion. We will also familiarise you with the ideas of some great Indian thinkers on religion and humanity. This may help you in understanding that true religion does not encourage intolerance; rather it teaches humility and tolerance and contributes to durable peace in the society.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Define religion
- Explain how religious tolerance is viewed as the guiding spirit of our religious tradition
- Analyse the way to ensure the spirit of religious harmony if peace has to prevail.

15.2 DEFINING RELIGION

‘Religion is realization; not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed

into what it believes. That is religion' (Swami Vivekananda). However, philosophers and scholars have differences on the definition of religion. In the multiethnic and philosophically diverse global culture defining religion seems more elusive. The following definition of religion is given in the Oxford Dictionary: 'the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods; a particular system of faith and worship and a pursuit or interest followed with devotion'. In explaining what constitutes religion *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* suggests a list of traits across diverse cultures. These are:

- Belief in supernatural beings
- A distinction between sacred and profane objects
- Ritual acts focused on sacred objects
- A moral code believed to be sanctioned by the Gods
- Prayer and other forms of communication with Gods etc.

Numerous issues may be raised in defining religion but commonly one understands religion as belief in something sacred and prayer and other forms of communication with a supernatural controlling power. Worship is perhaps the most basic element of religion, but moral conduct, right beliefs and participation in religious ceremonies, services and institutions are also constituent elements of the religious life as practiced by believers and worshippers and as commanded by religious scriptures and sages. Believing in something supernatural even existed in early civilisations like Egypt, Harappa, Mesopotamia and other parts of the world. Equally important to understand is the expression of religious feelings and beliefs in diverse ways which has resulted in different kind of religious doctrines, rituals in the world. Plurality of religions is not only a fact but also a necessity for the development of society. Mahatma Gandhi very aptly observed that 'The soul of the religions is one but is encased in a multitude of forms'.

15.3 INDIAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

We are going to discuss the importance of religious tolerance in the context of India although the spirit of religious tolerance is equally important in the context of other countries as well. India is known for its tolerant and liberal attitude towards people of different beliefs from historical times. Major religions practised in India are Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Sikhism. It would not be out of place to familiarise you with the evolution of various religious traditions in India. When we talk about Indian religious traditions in historical context the first thing that comes to our mind is the religious practices of the Harappan people. Based on archaeological findings, it is suggested that the Harappan people believed in the supernatural force and they worshipped deities both male and female and also developed religious practices and symbolism. This was followed by the Vedic civilisation which saw the composition of the Rig-Veda, the Yajur-Veda, the Sama-Veda and the Atharva-Veda and each of these having four fold subdivisions- the Samhitas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas and the Upanishads. Although rituals and sacrifices constituted the most important feature of the Vedic religion, in the Upanishadic period we find that ritualistic part of religion was relegated to a lesser important position. The goal of life, according to the Upanishads, is realisation of Brahman. Self-realisation alone can dispel ignorance and bestow immortality. Religion is not a search for a creed but a search for an experience of God, a search in which questioning and inquiry hold a high place together with faith. Hinduism is based on the corpus of Vedic texts unlike religions like Jainism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity which began with historical founders and their teachings codified in a single sacred text or a group of texts regarded as

the Canon. With the development of other religious texts like the Dharmasutras, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas new features and values were added to Hinduism but the basic tenet of Hinduism i.e. religious tolerance and religious pluralism remain unchanged. According to Bhikhu Parekh, in spite of doctrinal differences and sectarian quarrels, the Hindu religious tradition succeeded because 'it places tolerance at the centre of morality and religion, and avoids the all too familiar monistic disputes about which way of life is the best and should be imposed on others'. Krishna says in the Gita: 'whatever may be the form in which each devotee seeks to worship me with faith I make their faith steadfast in that form alone'.

Both Jainism and Buddhism originated in India around sixth century B.C. as a protest against Brahmanical authority and ritualism of Hinduism. It is also seen as a consequence of changes in society and polity of the period. According to Jainism, the universe is eternal and God has nothing to do with creation of the universe. The Jain philosophy divides the world primarily into the duality of Jiva and Ajiva. Jainism starts with the premise that the soul is found entangled with Karma since eternity. Accumulated Karmic matter blocks the path of knowledge and happiness. Right Faith, Right Knowledge and Right Conduct offer a graduated pathway towards liberation which lays that people and mendicants can follow according to their vows.

The gospel of the Buddha avoided all hypotheses regarding the unknown and distanced itself from ritualism, theology and metaphysics. Buddhism stressed on the perfection of character and devotion to virtues. The basic teachings of the Buddha are centred on the reality of human suffering and the need to find way of lasting relief from all forms of discontent. Peaceful and blissful Enlightenment is achieved through a gradual training, a Path which is called the Eightfold Path consisting of the diligent cultivation of virtue, meditation and wisdom.

Islam originated in the West Asia and following Islamic incursions into Northern and Central India since the eleventh century Islam gradually spread in India. Islamic religious thought is based on the recognition of the unity of the creator and of man's submission to his will. Faith in one and only one God has contributed to the concept of unity in multiplicity. Islam speaks of equality and justice to all. It believes in universal brotherhood and a bond of faith among its followers. The Koran affirms 'All creatures are members of one family of God'.

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak. Guru Nanak's teachings were strictly monotheistic, without scope for the worship of any deity or human teacher. His teachings emphasised equality and good actions transcending the boundaries of colour, caste and creed. While in Mecca he was asked who was superior, a Hindu or a Muslim, to which the Guru replied that without good actions both were of no consequence. 'Truth is high but higher still is truthful living', said Guru Nanak.

Christianity began with Jesus. The Jews were under the Roman domination and they were very much opposed to the Roman intervention in their life and culture. Jesus, through his teachings, showed hope to the people and preached that the kingdom of God is rooted in service and love. In India, Christianity reached with St. Thomas in the early years but later on European merchants and missionaries further facilitated the spread of Christianity. Christianity emphasises love as the essential basis for action and thinking. There is no place for violence. The Bible says, 'No man liveth unto himself. We are all parts of one another. God hath made of one blood all nations that dwell upon the face of the earth.'

With this brief introduction to the essence of major religious traditions prevailing in India, because of certain historical context India has become the home of believers of various religions. Each religion, in its own way, has prescribed to its believer's values to be practised in life. At a fundamental level there was recognition of the essential unity of all religions. The

message of universal brotherhood is common to all religions. Dogmatism, fanaticism and exclusivism do not get primacy in any of the religious traditions. Still different schools and sects emerged within a particular religion and some among them became dogmatic and practised insularity. Failing to understand and appreciate the essence and value of diversity of religions and the principle of tolerance and co-existence, time and again we have witnessed religious conflicts causing great human sufferings. Before we discuss further on issues pertaining to religious tolerance in the following section, we would explain how Indian thinkers stressed on the essence of religious tolerance and peace.

15.4 INDIAN THINKERS ON RELIGIOUS HARMONY

Concern for religious tolerance and harmony was expressed at different times in our society due to tensions in the name of religion. In ancient India great ruler Asoka preached the merit of religious harmony and in medieval India the same was echoed in the religious policy of Akbar. The rock Edict XII of Asoka suggests, 'The faiths of others deserve to be honoured for one reason or another. By honouring them one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others'. 'Akbar, was extremely supportive of religious tolerance and he made it a recognized duty of the state to make sure that no man should be interfered with on account of religion, and anyone is to be allowed to go over to a religion that pleases him.' During modern times in the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 at America, Swami Vivekananda said, 'I am proud to belong to a nation which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal tolerance, but we accept all religions as true.' One has to break down the small barriers of one's own world and to strive for the world which belongs to all of us. 'The Lord has declared to the Hindu in His incarnation as Krishna: "I am in every religion as the thread through a string of pearls. Wherever thou seest extraordinary power raising and purifying humanity, know thou that I am there." And what has been the result? I challenge the world to find, throughout the whole system of Sanskrit philosophy, any such expression as that the Hindu alone will be saved and not others' (Swami Vivekananda). Vivekananda wrote, 'I accept all the religions that were in the past, and worship them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of Mohammedan, I shall enter the Christians Church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhist temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to find the light which enlightens the heart of every one'. In his address to the world parliament of religion Vivekananda asserted, 'Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often with human blood, destroyed civilization, and sent whole nations to despair....I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal'.

Gandhi wrote that 'I feel for and about Hinduism with all its faults and limitations. Nothing elates me so much as the music of the Gita or the Ramayana by Tulsidas, the only two books in Hinduism I may be said to know....I know the vice that is going on today in all the great Hindu shrines, but I love them in spite of their unspeakable failings....Hinduism is not an exclusive religion. In it there is room for the worship of all the prophets of the world. It is not a missionary religion in the ordinary sense of the term. It has no doubt absorbed many tribes in its fold, but this absorption has been of an evolutionary imperceptible character. Hinduism tells every one to worship God according to his own faith or *dharma*, and so it lives at peace with all the religions.' Gandhi repeatedly spoke of harmony and co-existence. He said, 'By

religion I do not mean formal religion or customary religion, but that religion which underlies all religions, which brings us face to face with our Maker. Indeed religion should pervade every one of our actions. Here religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe. It is not less real because it is unseen. The religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. it harmonizes them and gives them reality.'

Dr. S.Radhakrishnan in his *Hindu View of Life* wrote, 'While fixed intellectual beliefs mark off one religion from another, Hinduism sets no such limits. The Hindu thinker readily admits other points of view than his own and considers them just as worthy of attention as his own.'

References given above on the thinking of some prominent Indian thinkers on religious tolerance can be extended further. From the beginning the spirit of tolerance and accommodation formed the core of Indian religious tradition. If we look back to India's ancient religious tradition, we find that even in the days of Brahmanical religion dominated by ritualism and priest craft, there was tolerance for understanding the dissenting religious thought. Otherwise how could one explain the emergence of different religious ideas in the form of Jainism and Buddhism, who challenged the Vedic ritualism and practices of casteism? The school of materialism called the Charvaka did not believe in rebirth and transmigration of soul. Teachers like Kasyapa and Katyayana questioned the role of karma on the soul. In the Epic period also we find that there was great tolerance towards religious opinions and teachings which were not in tune with the dominant religious tradition. Even in modern period, within Hinduism, we find Rammohan Roy, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Dayanand Saraswati and many others who did not speak in same wavelength and were critical also of certain aspects of Hinduism. But all these did not breed intolerance and put one sect against the other. This rather acknowledges the spirit of diversity in Indian religious tradition and strengthens the virtue of secularism. Secularism here needs to be understood in the context of our civilisation, which has always given the space to individual to practice religion according to his belief and conviction. Secularism ensures others' right to religion and reasoning. Deviation from this leads to fundamentalism and fanaticism. Gandhi's definition of secularism as *Sarva Dharma Samabhava* (treating all religions equally) can be considered as most appropriate way of explaining secularism. The major strength of the Gandhian argument is that it has used the enormous power of religious belief in favour of a practice of political tolerance, instead of suggesting misleadingly that to practice tolerance one had to relinquish religious thinking altogether and accept an atheistic secularism. In a pluralistic society like ours, where different religious traditions along with number of sects co-exist cultural pluralism must be respected. Readings of the Veda and the Upanishads show in clear terms that long before the emergence of different religious sects and institutions that are today called *Hindu*, there was an acute realisation that there was a level of immanence and transcendence. The vision of the human world here is of concord and harmony. The entire universe was conceived of as a large family, 'Vasudeva Kutambakam'.

15.5 THE WAY TO RELIGIOUS HARMONY AND PEACE

At the moment when religion seems to have become the principal divisive force in the world, at the very moment of the full flowering of a modern materialistic civilisation, perhaps it is crucial to understand the way to religious tolerance. We are living in a world today which is pluralistic and multicultural. Industrialisation, liberalisation and globalisation cutting across regional, religious and other boundaries brought communities together. New ideas, beliefs and cultural movements have contributed to cultural diversity. We all know that for centuries India has been a multi-religious society. In an essay titled, 'Tagore and His India', Amartya Sen argued not to see 'the contemporary world as a "clash of civilizations"- with "the Muslim civilization,"

“the Hindu civilization,” and “the Western civilization”. Rabindranath Tagore described his family as the product of “a confluence of three cultures: Hindu, Mohammedan, and British”.... Rabindranath would be shocked by the growth of cultural separatism in India, as elsewhere. The “openness” that he valued so much is certainly under great strain right now- in many countries.’ The importance of reasoning and freedom we find in the writings of Tagore may help us in understanding the value of various traditions and a non-sectarian outlook. But still we fail to appreciate the greatness in the religion of others. Gandhi who stood for peace and religious tolerance became a victim of inter-religious violence. It is a fact that religious diversity in the past as well as in the contemporary times has caused social and political conflicts. But this cannot drive us away from religion. We believe or do not believe in religion we are born as either Hindu or Muslim or Christian. Our religious identity is one among various other identities like national, regional, linguistic, caste, class, gender, etc. Even within a particular religious identity one may find differences among its believers on various issues. Based on religious differences Pakistan was created in 1947 at the cost of huge human sufferings; and so did the creation of Bangladesh because the Bengali Muslims felt oppressed under the non-Bengali Muslims. Amartya Sen has observed, ‘The Islamic identity can be one of the identities the person regards as important (perhaps even crucial), but without thereby denying that there are other identities that may also be significant. What is often called “the Islamic world” does, of course, have a preponderance of Muslims, but different persons who are all Muslims can and do vary greatly in other respects, such as political and social values, economic and literary pursuits, professional and philosophical involvements, attitude to the west, and so on.’ The same is applicable for other religions also like Hinduism, Christianity, Sikhism, etc. Religious disharmony need not necessarily place one religion against the other; there may be occasions when people within the same religion may fight to establish one’s dominance over the other. In case of conflicts, if one individual or a group of people belonging to a particular religion engage in conflict with others belonging to different religion, we should not blame the religion of those people because in every religion we find people of different ethical or moral values having different interests. In the past as well as in the present, people of different religions have lived together. Therefore, the challenge before us is how to face the religious fundamentalists.

Bhikhu Parekh in an article, ‘Dialogue Between Cultures’, has explained that in stead of suppressing the voices of the fundamentalists one must opt for dialogue to win over the fundamentalists. Any oppressive measure may provoke social instability threatening the civil liberties of ordinary citizens. Fundamentalists not necessarily are homogenous group. Efforts should be made to argue with them and expose their hollowness and to create a rift within their ranks. ‘The fundamentalists cannot avoid appealing to reason and accepting the discipline of the dialogue....We must not therefore give up on them altogether, and should listen to them, understand them, and win them over to the rules of dialogical democracy. We should live by our values, not theirs, and our commitment to dialogue requires us to exclude none.’ This prescription of Bhikhu Parekh holds merit. In any democratic set up dialogue helps in resolving any deadlock. Gandhian philosophy based on non-violence and Satyagraha always emphasised winning over the enemies through a process of dialogue and positive actions. It is through public pressure drawing upon our great traditions that efforts have to be made to prevail upon those who try to misuse religious identity for short-term gains. It would be apt to remember Vivekananda’s assertion for religious harmony. He said,

‘Much has been said of the common ground of religious unity. I am not going to venture my own theory. But if any one here hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others, to him I say, “Brother, yours is an impossible hope.” Do I wish that Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that Hindu or

Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid...if the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: it has proved to the world that holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. ... "Help and not Fight," "Assimilation and not Destruction," "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension." (Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda).

The core concern of every religion is the well-being of human kind and to help every individual to realise the ultimate truth of human life. When ever people tried to create discord in the society misusing the basic tenets of religion, in the long run they failed in their mission and harmony prevailed upon conflicts. As a citizen we have to raise our voice against the misuse of religion and allow people to live according to their respective beliefs.

15.6 SUMMARY

In the past as well as in the recent years we have witnessed conflicts and tensions in societies in the name of religion. We have explained that all religions teach the ways to realise the ultimate reality or one may call God. We have discussed how India became the home of various religious traditions. The Hindu religious tradition because of its tolerant spirit succeeded in living with doctrinal differences. Great Indian thinkers drew our attention to this unique religious pluralism. The challenge before us is how to put into practice the spirit of tolerance when people misuse our religious identity. In a democratic society, dialogue is the best means to persuade people to adopt the true spirit of religion. We have to be vigilant and active in educating people about the true spirit of religion. We may end with what Rabindranath Tagore spoke on religion in England, 'It is significant that all great religions have their historic origin in persons who represented in their life a truth which was not cosmic and unmoral, but human and good. They rescued religion from the magic stronghold of demon force and brought it into the inner heart of humanity, into a fulfillment not confined to some exclusive good fortune of the individual but to the welfare of all men. This was not for the spiritual ecstasy of lonely souls, but for the spiritual emancipation of all races. They came as the messengers of Man to men of all countries and spoke of the salvation that could only be reached by the perfecting of our relationship with Man the eternal, Man the Divine.'

15.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Define Religion and analyse India's religious traditions.
2. Examine the contribution of various thinkers in the realm of religious thinking.
3. Analyse in your own words the relationship between religion and peace.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda.

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