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Pluralism, Dissent, and Peace: A Subaltern View

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Abstract: In this article the author argues that religious pluralism cannot be grasped deeply in a-historical manner; it needs, on the other hand, a context-specific exploration in order to make meaningful statements upon it. It has to be anchored context-sensitively on social reality as it obtains in different instances of situatedness, the *sitz-im-leben* of life. Accordingly, this reflection would like to pursue a socio-religious approach, anchoring on a subaltern location.

This agonistic experience of religious pluralism takes place in a dialectics of dissent and ascent. It is a dissent to the dominating other, and an ascent to the dominated self; it is an acute moment of experiencing distinction and identity, in an on-going process of negotiation with the other. This

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negotiation takes place within a deeper experience of the divine dialectics of transcendence and immanence, a spiritual experience which transcends the historical experience of domination, even while affirming and assuring a new emancipatory identity to the dominated.

Keywords: Religious pluralism, Dissent, Religious diversity, *Sitz-im-leben*, Empowering peace.

Introduction

Discourse on religious pluralism is being pursued from different angles today.¹ A theological angle looks into the theological value of plurality of religions and their mutual relationship; a philosophical perspective explores the way religious pluralism deals with such ultimate questions as ontology of religious pluralism, one and many, universality and particularity, and the like. These perspectives tend to treat religious pluralism in a-temporal and non-spatial manner. In this paper, I would like to present an argument that religious pluralism cannot be grasped deeply in a-historical manner; it needs, on the other hand, a context-specific exploration in order to make meaningful statements upon it. It has to be anchored context-sensitively on social reality as it obtains in different instances of situatedness, the *sitz-im-leben* of life. Accordingly, this reflection would like to pursue a socio-religious approach, anchoring on a subaltern location.

1. Locating the Context

The contemporary western Euro-American world speaks of religious pluralism, by and large, in a post-Enlightenment context. Among others, there are two core sets of changes which have characterised the context there: One, the dismaying or dissipation of the modernist

framework, and the other, the experience of globalisation, which has brought forth, a 'reverse colonisation', or a new experience of communities, especially of religio-cultural communities. The former, against the development of certain saturation in secular modernist discourse, has tended to steer its orientation away from objectivist positivist thinking which, with its instrumental rationality, as the critical theorists would have it, strived to bring diversity under its ambit of universality, and projected the universal citizen as its sublime practitioner. The other, quite consequentially, mediated an experience of the presence of the other, especially the erstwhile third world other(s) along with their religio-cultural identities. These two currents of changes seem to serve as the typical Euro-American context from which the discourse on religious pluralism emerges. As a consequence, the discourse is informed by a new sensitivity to community, characteristically different from the previous *Gemeinschaft* type. It is a new sensitivity in that the community is not looked as a pre-given overarching paradigm of life for an individual, but, as a necessary constitutive process in the construction of selfhood and identity of individuals; It is a sensitivity which, within the broad political framework, treats the cultural rights of individuals. In this sensitivity, the religious identity becomes one of the salient forms of the cultural community or the predominant cultural right of the individual, serving as the 'sources of the self' as Charles Taylor would have it.² Religious pluralism in this context is therefore a post/advanced modernist or post-secularist discourse.

The context is characteristically different in most of the countries of the Southern and Eastern continents. Indian context has its unique characteristics, and its discourse of religious pluralism today needs to be situated within its experience of a 'fractured modernity', which is a skewed modernity, producing post-secularist / post-modernist

discourses among a certain section, leaving a vast majority of the population still under the grip of feudal forces. The fractured modernity impacted differentially upon different social worlds, causing the emergence of a mixture of the traditional *Gameinschaft* and the modern *Geselleschaft* types of societies. Differentiability goes with systemic ambivalence and complexity, which are perhaps the characteristic features of the discourse on religious pluralism in India today.

One way out of this systemic ambivalence is locating the discourse within a particular social world and exploring it from that location. This short reflection, accordingly, endeavours to locate it within the subaltern world and argues that religious dissent is integral to a substantive religious pluralism in the Indian context. By 'religious dissent' I mean a religious experience, which articulates an alternative or a counter to an existing religious tradition that has obtained hegemonic proportions. The alternative or counter religious tradition is characterised by a deep sense of egalitarianism, anti-hierarchy, participation, interrogation and contestation of the dominant tenets and practices that legitimise a hegemonic tradition.

2. Religious Dissent

When a specific form of religiosity, epitomised in the consecration of *Ezhava Shiva*, was manifest in Sri Narayana Guru movement (of Travancore), a mystic in South Travancore, known as Vaikuntacami, was mediating a religiosity which centred around a contextual interpretation of Dharma, the paradigmatic religious ideal in India. He said: "...uplift of the lowly is dharma". He said this against a background wherein Travancore, called by some historians as the land of Charity, had attempted to

live up to the *varnashrama dharma* ideal, and, accordingly, considered serving the Brahmin as its *dharmic* virtue. The life and activities of Vaikuntasamy became the hub of a process of reinterpretation of the classical dharma. The hermeneutical endeavour was impregnated with the social experience of the subaltern people, who lived a broken life, characterised by several inhuman forms of oppression. Rituals, symbols, and oral teachings emerged out of this hermeneutical task, which mediated a new religiosity for the subaltern people. Phenomenologically, it was a religious dissent whose site of origin was simultaneously the mystical experience of Vaikuntasamy as well as the experience of social subordination of the subaltern people. Both personal as well as collective experiences converged into the manifestation of this alternative religious tradition in the South Travancore context of the nineteenth century.

There is immense literature produced or being produced on similar religious traditions which emerged in many parts of the Indian subcontinent during the eighteenth-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was an era of religious transformations, enkindled by a process of innovation as well as reinterpretation of some of the dominant religious ideals of the time. There was a churning of the ocean, so to say. One of the key contributors to this churning was the phenomenon of western modernity as introduced, in its ideological dimension, by western antiquarians, ethnographers, educators, Christian missionaries, and several other agents. The churning went with the emergence of waves of religiosity or religious experience which found differential manifestations among the different socio-cultural groups. That which I speak here as 'religious dissent' was a particular form of religiosity which was found in this churning; It was a religious experience that exhibited such dynamic features as critical consciousness, spirit of interrogation and reinterpretation, and the will to forge

alternative identity for the religious actors. Dissent here is not a negative energy, but, a positive potentiality for emancipation. As Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar would have it, it is a “resilient vitality which threatens hegemony by maintaining a persistent presence in the very forms of life which hegemony seeks to thwart.”³ Sree Narayana Guru movement, Ayya Vazhi, Vallalar movement, Varkari movement, Devi movement, and Chamar movement are only few examples of the hundred and odd such religious phenomena. Many more of similar religious phenomena are being unearthed today. Works carried out by pioneers like MSA Rao, Stephen Fuchs, the Subaltern Studies Project, Kenneth Jones, Gail Omvelt, G. Aloysius, Lawrence Babb, David Hardiman, and several other scholars point to the presence of such phenomena.

Not that these movements of religious dissent arose only during the modern era; we already see features of them in the forerunners like Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivakam, bhakti traditions and so on. However, those of the modern era helped extend the experience of an integration of religiosity and critical consciousness among wider sections of people. These newer traditions, according to several studies, are the very manner in which the subaltern people integrated modernity in their lives and sought to fashion a new emancipatory identity for them. By constructing a mythography with a respectable past, a dynamic present and a bright future wherein full freedom would reign, these religious traditions served to construct a transformative self for their followers.

3. Dynamic Religious Diversity

This experience of the religious dissent arose from within the experience of the dynamic religious diversity this

subcontinent experienced for a very long time in history. Folkloristics, in the recent decades, has captured and continues to capture it descriptively and analytically. The innumerable variety of folk deities, male and female, which form the object of worship; the fascinating diversity of ritual practices and beliefs; the rich region-specific oral traditions which are performed in the ritual ambience – all these are only the traces of the deep-seated richness of the religious experience of the people living especially at the margins of the society. These folk traditions are said to function in diverse manners – as collectivising strategies, as community catharsis, as sites of communication of sacra, as liminal spaces generating creative freedom and equality, as rituals of resistance, as weapons of the weak, as sites of popular religiosity, as identity markers, and so on. Their innumerable forms and functions are only indicators of the richness of religiosity, and its context-specific diversity.

This diversity is dynamic in that it is not just a notional diversity, but one characterised by social, economic, and cultural experiences of different communities. And, in sharing these attributes, it also becomes a negotiating diversity, which keeps negotiating differences, contesting dominances, interrogating hegemonies, and so on. All these features of the dynamic diversity bring forth innumerable cults, beliefs, ritual practices, performances and so on. As Romila Thapar opines, “[T]he religious reality in the past for the majority of Indians had been the recognition of a multiplicity of religions ... rooted in local cults, beliefs and rituals and identified less by religion and more by *jati* or by *zat*... They maintained a distance from the *brahmanas* and the *ulema* for they were essentially unconcerned with norms of the *sastras* or with *fatwas*, governed as they were by their own customary observances...”⁴ Unfortunately, the history of this dynamic

diversity is not recorded, and they do not find a place in the public discussion of the Indian religious landscape.

The dynamic religious diversity is enriched by its embodied religious experience, which combined the bodily presence with transcendence in many unique ways. These religious traditions took less to the rejection of this-worldly duties, much less to a soul-body dualism which characterised the western process of degrading the body as the terrain of the materialist domain. Body as a site of life was less antagonised against the site of a soul. Body was perhaps not treated as polluting as against a pure soul. However, it must be noted here that the bodies of the lower castes were treated as polluting. It was therefore in the recognition of a social hierarchy that the body came to be treated as polluting and impure, but not so much against a pure soul/spirit.

It is also the case that religious diversity and dissent, as they became representations of acute disputations on social hierarchy, were sought to be neutralised either through open conflicts or by subtle religio-cultural mechanics. Open conflicts between religious sects were engendered by the developing strain in relationships between social groups. The other method is more subtle. It is one of co-option by the dominant tradition into its symbolic world of the different or differentiating traditions. It means that the usual cliché that Indian religions are tolerant towards the other cannot be taken in a face value.

4. The Changing Context Today

One today speaks of religious revival taking place all over the globe. One of the chief experiences of this revival is presencing of religion in the public sphere, associating it

with identity discourse. This revival could be explained from several angles. However, the revival in the Indian context cannot straightaway be explained as, for example, Gianni Vattimo would do in a western context as the 'return of the repressed'. It needs more context specific explanations. Certainly, there is a revival of religion in the Indian public sphere. But it is not something that comes after a process of secularisation. It occurs against the globalising context, wherein facilities for public representation and communication are more to count. This revival is not as natural as it is presented to be. A strenuous effort is being made to give an orientation to this revival, and effort is being made by the steadily growing middle class of India. The growing middle class is in need of an identity, which can be presented as specifically their own in contrast to other religious traditions that they experience in the global arena. The middle class therefore vigorously promotes *a* religion for India, in a homogenous form. This urge of the middle-class ventures to do away with all dissent and diversities present in the grassroots of Indian religio-cultural terrain. It projects, as explained by Romila Thapar, a syndicated Hinduism, along the lines of the semitic religions which are more organised. This dynamic of syndicating takes place against the growing interest of the middle classes for identity, which are linked with their opportunities in the global scenario. As Thapar suggests, "[T]here is inevitably a search for new identities and in the Indian situation of recent times, encouragement has been given to religious identities, on the basis of a particular interpretation of what is regarded as the Indian tradition and Indian history."⁵ It is this interest which provides the specific tone and pitch to the demands raised by the forces of cultural nationalism.

The cultural nationalist forces (read Hindutva forces) have a project that intends to include all religio-cultural differences within their fold. The trajectory of this inclusive project begins

from the time when India began to experience the fractured modernity. A section of the Indian population, spearheaded by the ‘modern makers’ of India, began, with the help of the resources generated by the colonial and Christian missionary scholarship, to construct a cultural nationalism based on the sanskritic religious traditions. This inchoate nationalism, later on, within the impulse of electoral politics, began to organise itself as politico-cultural movement and political parties. This stream today presents itself with a strong inclusive paradigm of religious pluralism. It forcefully imposes the idea that different religions are to be allowed their spaces only within a core cultural nationalistic vision. This inclusive paradigm goes against the very grain of religious pluralism and it strives to stifle the space for religious dissent.

This inclusivist project of Hindutva forces has also a hidden script. The middle-class interest of the Hindutva works also to hide those factors which are uncomfortable for recognition. It is nothing but the actual socio-economic reality of India. That the level of poverty, as per the Tendulkar committee, has increased to 41% against the UN multi-dimensional poverty index, that the Muslims cut a very appalling figure in terms of economic and educational development as per the Sachar committee report, that civil liberties of the Dalits are continued to be denied in the public sphere, etc are uncomfortable facts which the upstart middle class of India does not want to recognise. The projected cultural nationalism does much to help them in hiding this dismal face of India in their global playing field. Thapar points it out clearly, as “[T]he intensification of Hindutva has acted, as intended by its followers, to divert attention from the fact that almost half the population of India is at or below the poverty line and

is denied even the most basic rights and amenities.”⁶ The hidden script is not merely to hide the uncomfortable facts from the public gaze, but in a very typical Indian fashion, it is also a vigorous attempt at maintaining the hegemony of the sanskritic tradition over the multiple religious traditions, and contributing to the maintenance of the social hierarchy associated with it.

One finds a convergence between the market-led cultural homogenisation and the cultural nationalism which seeks to steamroll myriad forms of culture into one cultural framework. The logic of the market is to make every culture and even religion to play to the tune of the profit-making market, and try to marginalise and destroy that culture which does not become market-friendly. Similar is the dynamics with which the forces of cultural nationalism are functioning in our country today. ‘Do not tolerate radical differences, much less radical dissents in culture and religion’ is the mantra being chanted both by market and cultural nationalist forces. What does it mean to speak of religious pluralism in this context? Religious pluralism, which contributes to empowering peace, would preserve a radical religious dissent, which would stand apart prophetically, without falling victim to the forces of the market as well as the hegemonic cultural nationalist forces.

5. Concluding Thoughts: Avenues for Empowering Peace

Religious dissent and diversity are, phenomenologically speaking, unique forms of religious experiences which contribute to maintain a healthy pluralism and peace. They are manifest in contexts which are characterised by creative agency of the subaltern people in a dialectical relationship to their experience of social subordination and hegemony. They emerge at the meeting point of an agonising emptiness and a creative will to respond to this experience of emptiness; it is an agonistic moment wherein an acute sense of emptiness,

socially imposed, is responded with a creative urge for self-construction and selfhood. This agonistically creative moment articulates itself symbolically in the form of religious traditions. This symbolic articulation is simultaneously the way in which subaltern people experience transcendence and hope in their lives.

This agonistic experience takes place in a dialectics of dissent and ascent. It is a dissent to the dominating other, and an ascent to the dominated self; it is an acute moment of experiencing distinction and identity, in an on-going process of negotiation with the other. This negotiation takes place within a deeper experience of the divine dialectics of transcendence and immanence, a spiritual experience which transcends the historical experience of domination, even while affirming and assuring a new emancipatory identity to the dominated. When this experience gets articulated symbolically, it presents itself as a healthy alternative, which transforms agonistically the antagonism generated in the social suffering of the subaltern people into an empowering alternative. Herein religion occurs in its positive potentialities, as creative and emancipatory experiences of life. It is the occurrence of such moments of religious experience that has intimated and continues to mediate an experience of substantive and empowering peace in the society.

It implies that we create space for dissent in our society. This task of 'creating space' is not a passive toleration of the other, but an active and agonistic negotiation with the other which opens a rupture for the religious dissent to burst forth. Such moments inform the life and traditions of subaltern people and they ensure substantive peace in our society.

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¹ Whenever I remember Dr. Cyril Desbruslais, a wind of youthfulness passes by my mind; he came across to me as a person for the young generation. The plays he staged, the roles he acted out,

the way he went about, and the brilliant classes he took – all have an air of youthfulness. There was also an aspect of critical dissent in his youthfulness. Once when he had dressed up for an inaugural mass, he had tucked portions of an oversize alb around the cincture like a lump, and joined the procession. I noticed it and smiled, and he said in a quiet voice, “that’s my way of showing the dissent.” Not only in an instance like this, but in the very way he lived out his priestly calling there was an air of dissent, a very substantive and meaningful one at that. My present essay, therefore, is dedicated to that fine aspect of the person of Dr. Cyril Desbrulais.

² Cf. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989.

³ Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, “The Diversity and Dialectics of Dalit Dissent and Implications for a Dalit Theology of Liberation”, in Sathianathan Clarke et al., *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, New Delhi: OUP, p. 55.

⁴ Romila Thapar, “Secularism and History”, in Romila Thapar, *Cultural Pasts – Essays in Early Indian History*. OUP, 2004, p. 1021.; T.N. Madan would clearly point out that, “Hinduism is a federation of faiths with a horizontal as well as vertical distribution rather than a single homogenous religion.” (*Religions of India*, 42)

⁵ Romila Thapar, “Secularism and History”, p. 1023.

⁶ Romila Thapar, *Historical Interpretations and the Secularising of Indian Society*. Bangalore: Visthar, 1999, p. 27