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Religion in the Emerging World Order

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Abstract

Our world witnesses life-denying and destructive tendencies of violence. In the following pages the author examines some of the expressions of this violence and suggests some orientations of the course religions must follow in this world. This paper does not refer to any particular religion but to all religions of the world including the primal religions. Religions cannot solve the problems of the world by themselves. However, they can bring about an attitudinal change in their followers, and this can go a long way in the direction of dismantling prejudices and motivating people to live in peace and harmony. Realizing the present situation of violence in which religions are also attributed with having a leading role, they must take active initiatives to resolve conflicts, to have tolerance towards each other, leading to respect and collaboration. Every religion stands for overcoming egoism and reaching out to others. This probably is the greatest contribution that religions can make to the world, if they succeed in making their followers abide by these principles. Egoism engenders violence, hatred, revenge and torture. In all this, repentance for the past is obligatory for most religions. Every religion must imbibe a cosmic consciousness and unity. In summary, religions are the promoters of an authentic way of human life, and this is their initial vision as well.

Keywords:

Violence, destruction, religion, cosmic consciousness, world-order, NGOs, economy, environment.

The world that we live in is a mixture of blessings and woes. Our world has many life-giving signs to offer, probably the most noteworthy of them all being the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948. This in turn has influenced most nations and religions in the world. As far as the

Catholic Church is concerned, Pope John XXIII incorporated these rights in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963). This was followed by Vatican II and the Synod of 1971 that popularized the notion of justice in the world society with its statement: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of proclaiming the gospel.”¹

Our world witnesses also life-denying and destructive tendencies of violence in every sector of human life and nature, in various forms. In the following pages we shall examine some of the expressions of this violence and in the context of this we shall suggest some orientations of the course religions must follow in this world. This paper does not refer to any particular religion but to all religions of the world including the primal religions. However, I do not bring in the various ideologies of our times, so that the focus remains on the religions as such.

I. THE WORLD ORDER

1. Political

The world is going through a paradigm shift with regard to its politics, economy and society. As far as the political situation is concerned, the end of the last century brought about great upheavals, changing the face of many nations. We saw the crumbling of the Berlin wall and the disintegration of the former Soviet Union as well as the Eastern block. We have not only not recovered from the shock, but are still witnessing the aftermath of some of these developments, such as the case of the terrorist attack on the Russian school in Beslan following the Chechen conflict.

The fall of the iron curtain was followed by the reunification of Germany. But we do not have the vision of a new world. World politics is guided not for peace, but for security and balance of power, by containing crises and, as far as possible, by avoiding

wars. This we saw in the policies of Henry Kissinger, for whom there were no permanent friends or permanent foes, but only permanent interests.² Kissinger in fact opposed any peace initiative with Vietnam.

The persistent pursuit of the American policy of a mixture of diplomacy and force has left Americans without credibility. The latest instance of this is the invasion of Iraq, which was described by the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan as illegal and unacceptable.

The catastrophe of the first World War and the formation of the League of Nations could have induced a new world order, with a better form of relations between governments, nations and societies, thus avoiding the terrific experience of another war. However, the ideology of 'political realism,' i.e., the domination of humans by humans, would become the official policy of nations like the US, with the philosophy of "national interest." This in turn justified the naked aggression against Chile, Grenada, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama and so on. This power politics with national interest is pushing the world to a unipolar world order.

On the other hand, it is political power, formal and informal, national and international, that shapes human progress and moulds the international community. Politics matters for people everywhere. All want to be free to determine their destinies, express their opinions and participate in the decisions that shape their lives.

Certainly, there is a greater appreciation of democracy in the world today as more nations open themselves to expanding political freedoms. Today 140 of the world's nearly 200 countries hold multiparty elections.³ It is also true that several countries like Zimbabwe that took steps to democratize in the 1980s have reversed to authoritarianism and some of them have become harbingers of extremism and violence. The ignominious 9/11, the ongoing human tragedy in Kashmir, etc., are some of the

expressions of this violence. Growing militarization makes poor nations poorer. The world context, characterized by unjust political and economic structures, prevents people from developing as children of God towards a global human community.

2. The Economic Situation

It has been generally believed that the poor nations of the world are poor because they belong to 'traditional societies' with their own rhythm of life and customs that have contributed to their economic dependence. Though there could be some truth in this, it does not explain the reality fully. Their situation is due also to the exploitation by others through unjust systems such as colonialism, lopsided trade, etc. The rich nations are rich partly because of their efforts and also because of the long-term capital build up that the unjust socio-economic-political system permitted.

The poorest nations, afflicted by a combination of malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, high birthrates, unemployment, low income, etc., are elbowed out of the order. Poverty makes many voiceless both nationally and internationally. The poorest nations are unable to produce a surplus over consumption of any commodity. This is against the backdrop of an ever-increasing population that exerts pressure on the available resources in these countries.

We have another situation where the nation concerned may have succeeded in producing a surplus of some commodity over their own needs, but cannot trade this surplus for the things they need nor can they take advantage of the world markets for their produce.

The economic disparity worldwide is appalling. The economic growth in the recent past has not helped to reduce the economic inequality within and among nations. While the already rich nations have witnessed rapid economic growth, we come across slow growth in other regions such as Africa and Asia. The world's richest 1% of people receive as much income as the poorest 57%. The richest 10% of the US population has an income equal to that

of the poorest 43% of the world. The income of the richest 25 million Americans is equal to that of almost 2 billion people in the poorest nations. The income of the world's richest 5% is 114 times that of the poorest 5%.⁴

The terminology of “the third world” has become a ubiquitous reality since the 1970s. Though the term is generally understood as referring to those nations which are not part of the industrialized developed nations under the US leadership nor the Eastern Block led by the former Soviet Union, the specific reality that distinguishes them is their economic marginality. Economic marginalization has meant separation from, and subordination to, the dominant industrial economies that have developed, especially in Europe and North America. They are more known for their supply of primary products as opposed to the industrialized nations who supply the industrial output. Thus at bottom is the question of underdevelopment.

These nations owe their economic marginalization to their colonialist background that in itself was guided by control and exploitation. We must remember that Japan, China and Turkey were the only countries that escaped direct European control. Even China had to bear the brunt partially after the Opium War of 1889. Colonial powers ensured the destruction of local industry. When the British came to India, there were cheaper goods. However, the British introduced export restrictions on Indian goods, and as they gained political control they destroyed the local industry by banning the production of these goods. It is said they went to the extent of permanently maiming the hands of thousands of weavers. The net result was that between 1815 and 1832 cotton exports from India to England fell thirteen times.⁵ The British policy not only destroyed Indian industry but also led to massive unemployment and poverty. Lord Bentinck, the British Governor General in India, reported in 1835 that “the misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India.”⁶ The percentage of the non-agricultural population in India decreased from 45% in

1800 to 26% by 1940. Thus India, on the way to becoming an industrial diversified economy, was reduced to the status of an under-developed poor nation under the weight of colonialism, and this is true of most former colonies.

No doubt, these colonies are now independent, but to a large extent there is a perpetuation of interests. In place of the former white bosses now we have the local guardians of a system that exists primarily for their own interests, as was the case in the colonial days. The economic development of the masses in itself is not their priority. They are always scheming ways to hang on to power as the means of guarding all sorts of self-interest. This in turn breeds corruption of untold dimensions, which again is depriving the masses of the right to development.

Our past theory and practice of development has left millions of people in starvation and despair. Certain estimates from the World Bank project about 800 million barely surviving in the southern hemisphere, with incomes insufficient to secure the basic needs of life. Most of these poor, both in Asia and Africa are in the rural areas. Four nations of Asia - India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia – contain about two thirds of the world's poor.

One of the common problems that the nations of the South face is ensuring fair and stable prices for the products that they export, mostly primary goods, in the form of basic commodities like food or minerals – tea, coffee, tobacco, jute, copper, zinc, iron ore, etc. They also must be assured of their share in the markets of the North. These will position them better to develop their own economies in a just and equitable manner and earn the revenue to import the capital and technology necessary for their development. For instance, Zambia enjoyed a certain amount of financial and economic well-being in the 1970s. However, the collapse of copper prices in the late 70s left the Zambian economy in shambles.

For the industry in the South, access to the northern markets of their products is an essential condition to flourish. The home market is limited or too poor to absorb the increase in production.

For the South, industry has to flourish to pay the rising wages and achieve higher living standards. The North objects to this saying that the Southern goods are produced cheaper, and hence the products in the North will suffer. Unless the South exports to the North it cannot pay to the North for the imports. Today there is a great trade imbalance between the North and the South, which can be solved only through a fair import-export. The policy of protectionism adopted by the North, sometimes by the South too, disturbs fair trade and endangers the jobs of the developing countries.

Another aspect of the lopsided economic situation is the unstable currency exchanges. One of the drawbacks with regard to the monetary system today is that national currencies are used as international reserves. The Brandt Report in 1980 had suggested the creation of an international currency to be used for the clearance of outstanding balances as well as the international reserves.

3. Impact of Globalization

Any attempt to come to terms with the contemporary world situation and the challenges it presents, has to deal with the phenomenon of globalization. It crystallizes diverse trends and features. It is a sign of hope for many, while it has brought disaster to others. Globalization offers the scope to share the benefits of technological development with all. However, today it has come to be primarily a globalization of the market and capital. In the present world this has become unavoidable. With the development of the technological and communication facilities, national economies are rapidly becoming global ones. Capital, technology and the market are overcoming all national barriers.

Globalization of the market affects the poor nations and the poor within nations most adversely. They are further pushed to the outer rims of society with little opportunity for participation as they have neither any goods to sell nor the purchasing capacity. The liberalization policies imposed upon the poorer nations with

the inherent demands of scrapping quantitative restrictions edge out local products of the poor from the market. This is inevitable due to the fascination for imported goods. On the other hand, imported goods are cheaper due to subsidies, mass production, availability of the latest technology, etc. The local products, unable to compete with the imported ones, are totally dislodged in the long run. The international big businesses with their hegemony take their place in the name of privatization. Local and foreign monopolies gradually swallow all local initiatives and enterprises.

Economically, we are witnessing five major monopolies:

A. Technology: The developed nations have the technology and try to maintain their hold over it. The poorer nations cannot get hold of the latest technology which, in turn prevents them from developing as well as makes them spend money to buy the products.

B. Financial control: With globalization and the lifting of the market controls, the finances of the developing countries have become subject to the control of the rich nations with the new multinational and transnational companies, with little accountability to the countries concerned. These financial agencies run the world according to their designs.

C. Natural resources: In the name of a free market the natural resources of the poorer nations are looted and plundered, with no regard for justice. We are witnessing how even traditional goods such as neem, bhasmati rice, etc., are coming under the patents of the richer nations.

D. Monopoly of weapons of mass destruction.

E. Cultural invasion through mass media and communication.

These have created a new hierarchy of lording over the distribution of wealth and the world order. Most nations are silent spectators with little power to change the system.

The success of a global entry into the global economy depends

to a great extent on what we do within the nations. There have to be immense efforts domestically in expanding basic education and improving health care for the citizens. Amartya Sen, the Nobel laureate, points out how Japan, which was a poor nation at the end of the 19th century, made great strides moving towards universal literacy. It was the prelude to its economic progress.⁷

The basic imperative is to improve the lives and freedoms of the people in the country. It is interesting to ask who are the people who benefit from economic transactions. What is required is that no effort be spared to distribute fairly the benefits of the global economy rather than allowing them to be monopolized by a few. For a poor, developing nation to flourish in the global economy, we have to ensure comprehensive progress that will benefit every section of the population within the nation. For the people of a poor nation to enter the global market, there has to be education and micro-credits. Thus globalization can be made a kingdom blessing for the poor of the world.

4. Environmental Disaster

Environment has become part of the dominant discourse. It is a major theme not only in international politics but also in local development.

Our age is experiencing an unprecedentedly high rate of resource utilization. The ever-expanding industrial development demands the steady flow of resources. But most of these industries are located in the West/North, though the resources are mostly in the South. This has led not only to the depletion of the natural resources of the South, but it has become the dumping ground for all the industrial waste.

Resources like land, forest, water, etc., traditionally controlled and used collectively by the communities, have come under the control of the multinational companies (MNCs) and the transnational companies (TNCs) in the course of colonialism and neocolonialism, leading to acute conflicts among the diverse

interests. The politically weak and the socially disorganized peoples are the greatest losers in these conflicts of interests. They are outside the market system, the greatest factor of globalization, as we saw.

Modern science and technology play a leading role in the utilization of the natural resources in a massive way, contributing to the conflict over the same resources. Hence, there is a need to redesign the use of these resources so that it would ensure social equality and ecological sustainability. Ecological movement, thus, is vitally linked to natural resources and the peoples' right to survival, especially in countries like India, where these resources are already getting depleted, partly due to indiscriminate use of them for the survival needs of the mass of the population and partly because of the massive industrial use of them. The introduction of resource and energy intensive production technologies leading to the economic growth of a minority, leaving the vast majority helpless with regard to their survival, is the acute problem that we encounter. This has given rise to uneven economic development and environmental conflicts in India and elsewhere. Indian civilization had been sensitive to the natural ecosystem that was supported for years till the arrival of the indiscriminate exploitation of these resources under the colonial masters. Unfortunately this same tendency is continued even after independence.

As an example we could take the marine ecology. The waters of the seas and the marine resources were considered to be humankind's common possession. This worked well until the arrival of modern technology. Today irreparable damage is done to marine productivity by the indiscriminate use of technology. Not only are the marine biodiversity and marine productivity affected by the oft-occurring oil spills or by the chemicals carried into the oceans by the rivers, which one time were the sources of food for marine life, but also other interventions like deep-sea trawling and bottom-sea trawling, are all leading to the situation of non-renewable sea

resources. Mother sea is gradually incapacitated to provide for human needs. This affects also the traditional fisherfolk, whose livelihood was taken care of by the sea with sustainable fishing techniques.

In short, today we come across two types of conflicts over the use of the natural resources of land, water and forests⁸:

A. The diversion of resources from sustenance needs to the demands of the market generates conflicts between commercial interests, either national or international and people's survival.

B. The same diversion of resources from nature's economy of essential ecological process to the market economy of commodity transactions, gives rise to ecological conflicts.

Here we see how justice is interrelated with sustainability. The poor are marginalized as they are deprived of the traditionally available natural resources. Financial investments and technology are the two major factors in this process, and this in turn invites privatization as the government often does not have either of them. Naturally MNCs and TNCs, with technology and intense resource development, are invited, paving the way for the local resources increasingly moving out of control of the local communities and the national governments into the hands of international financial institutions controlled by the same MNCs and TNSs of the rich nations who provide the aid and the capital for the development.

5. Religious Context

Colonialism saw the period of the dominance of Western Christianity in the world. However, that scenario is fast disappearing. Today we see the rapid revival of traditional religions and cultures in every part of the world. This has often led to violent polarization between believers in different religions. Religions with a fundamentalistic sway are becoming a threat to the future of humanity. Analysts have pointed out how most of the modern wars are waged in the name of ethnicity and religion.

Most people are tending to set aside religion as a leading factor

to hold modern society together. Its role is increasingly finding itself at the periphery. At any rate it is not to any one particular religion that the world looks but to religions in the plural. Dogmatic differences and claims of exclusivism can fan religious conflicts. We are no longer living in a world situation where one could make claims such as “a single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”⁹ These claims are not unique to the Christians, rather, most religions tend to hold their own uniqueness. Hopes of bringing all peoples of the earth into one religion and claiming one’s own religion to be the only valid religion are, undoubtedly, against the spirit of universal peace and harmony.

II. ROLE OF RELIGIONS

At the same time it has to be admitted that we cannot ignore the role of religions in the talk about peace, tolerance, democracy, etc. It would be unfortunate to leave aside religion altogether from these fields as religion is an integral part of most people, more so in Asia. In the general expectation of a new world order that is prevalent everywhere, in the midst of violence and war, injustice, hunger and untimely death, political interferences and invasions, religions, despite their past failures and frequent abandoning of their originary vision, can play a healing role. True, religions alone cannot solve the problems of the world, as they are far more complex. However, the role of religions along with other factors cannot be underestimated.

The problems of violence of any sort, hunger, starvation, sickness, exploitation, marginalization, etc., suggest the need for a new world order, a new worldview. On the other hand, all religions contain elements of peace and justice and profess that they are for human liberation. Just to quote a few examples from the scriptures of some religions:

“So the son of Pandu beheld the world with its myriad divisions standing together as one in the body of the god of gods” (*Bhagavad Gita* II.11).

“A man is not just if he carries a matter of violence; no, he who distinguishes both right and wrong, who is learned and leads others, not by violence but justly and righteously, and who is guarded by the Law (Dharma) and intelligent, is called just” (*Dharmapada* 19/256-257).

“If the gentleman forsakes benevolence, in what way can he make a name for himself? The gentleman never deserts benevolence, not even for as long as it takes to eat a meal. If he hurries and stumbles, one may be sure that it is in benevolence that he does so” (*Analects* 4:5).

“We created man. We know the promptings of his soul, and we are closer to him than the vein of his neck” (*Quran* 50: 5/119).

1. Respect for Human Dignity

We are witnessing a sort of global restlessness where the peoples of different nations of the globe are going through a process of consciousness awakening. They are becoming more and more aware of their dehumanized existence and are clamouring for their rightful place in the respective states and within the family of nations.

The above quotes show how religions subscribe to the dignity of every human being. This dignity demands that humans are not robbed of their opportunities and participation, that their rights are not discarded. Every human person, irrespective of race, profession, gender, age, physical or mental situation, religion, political view, etc., should be accorded an inalienable dignity. The leading social factor of our times is this regard for human dignity where all religions can collaborate. There can be no true peace and elimination of violence without justice and acceptance of the dignity of every human person.

Humans are not objects of commercialization or exploitation, but subjects of rights. This in turn demands that every human being, possessing reason and conscience, should behave in a genuinely human fashion, to do good to others and avoid inflicting

evil on others. Religions must make every effort to ensure that every human being, anywhere in the world, is treated humanly. Religions must popularize the golden rule: what you wish done to yourself do to others in every sphere of human life. This, as Hans Kung has argued, implies a culture of respect for all life and non-violence, a culture of solidarity and a just economic order; a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness, and above all a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women.¹⁰ Every religion must rise up and exhibit a global responsibility measuring up to the global problems and dangers.

The religions of the world must unite around the paradigm of humanity, the paradigm of the human cry for the “divine future” (Moltmann). Judged, at least from the Asian context, the need of the hour is not that religions must become prophets of a new God, but prophets of the human person. We in Asia do not lack a sense of the Transcendent. What we lack is a sense of the human person, the neighbour. Most of the world problems that we outlined earlier in fact, are, somehow, expressions of this lack of sensitivity for the human person.

Without the space for participation, and a culture of social justice, we cannot expect to have a control of emotions and to build a social order of peace and interrelatedness. Every religion, somehow, underlines the interrelatedness of human beings and the option for peace. True, one-sided interpretations of scriptures and the imagined or real threat to self-identity can drive religions away from these ideals, and they can become agents of dissipation and war. In the prevailing conditions of the world today religions must collaborate to weave a world of mutual understanding and relatedness leading to peace.

Human alienation from fellow humans is the significant problem of our times rather than human alienation from the divine. Rather, when the relationship at the horizontal level is taken care of, the vertical level will follow naturally. Religions are religions only when they exist for human well-being. Religions have not only to cater

to an otherworldly salvation, but must also give rise to a life-style that will lead to universal peace and justice. For this religions will have to become agents of transformation of the situations of death that exist in the world, into life-giving situations.

2. Bury Differences & Collaborate

Each religion must place the interests of humanity above its own interests. This presupposes that all religions give up any design of replacing other religions, without compromising the individual's right to follow the religion of his/her choice. Religions must look for what unites them, what they have in common rather than stressing the differences. It is laudable how Vatican II reminds Catholics that they have a common origin and a common destiny with the followers of other religions (*Nostra Aetate* 1).

Another point to be emphasized is that many religions have common roots. Whatever might have been the past relationship among these religions, today's world context calls for the collaboration of these religions. Religious groups like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, etc., have to learn to appreciate one another, realizing their common threads. They have to collaborate for a better world which is the ideal pursuit of all religions. All these should pave the way for mutual trust and the removal of prejudices and suspicions among religions.

Ours is an age of knowledge. In this age the acquisition and application of knowledge is the most important source of life and progress. In this context religions must take as a sign of the times the challenge to gain more knowledge about other religions and to collaborate with them. The followers of each religion in any part of the world must be open to gain more knowledge, not only of other religions, but also of what fellow religionists of one's own religion in the rest of the world are thinking about other religions. This will enable them to overcome the temptations of narrow mindedness and extreme conservatism in the face of other religions.

Religious knowledge must no longer be the monopoly of religious leaders alone, but ordinary people must be able to have a deeper understanding of other religions along with one's own religion. This, in turn, will encourage greater cooperation among the followers of different religions. There can be no survival of religions without the collaboration of all believers. Our world is threatened by a clash of religious civilizations. In this context we have to realize that there can be no peace in the world without peace among religions. "There will be no peace between civilizations without a peace between religions. And there will be no peace between religions without a dialogue between the religions," observes Hans Küng.¹¹ Part of this dialogue demands also that each religion re-examine its mission of converting others into itself. Though each religion has the right to be practised, and thus to be present in any place, every religion must refrain from advocating itself as the only valid religion and trying to convert all into itself with the claim that only it can serve as the vehicle of salvation. Religions must recognize that each religion has its own inner beauty, though all can learn from each other and be enriched by others. Hence, religions must try to complement each other and work to live in harmony. True, the individual should also have the right to follow the religion of his/her choice based on the experience derived from the life of the followers of the respective religions.

3. Towards a Just World-Order

Today we come across frequent talk about the need for a pluricentric world as opposed to a unipolar world. This presupposes increased pluralism in the world. This implies also collaboration in the global civil society. Not only must religions collaborate among themselves, but they must also advocate pluralism in the international systems and mechanisms leading to increased participation by the less privileged nations of the world. There are anomalous situations, for instance, in the World Trade Organization, where every member country has a seat and a vote.

But the actual decision-making is heavily determined by the largest and richest countries. Similarly, the different UN bodies too are gravitating towards the powerful countries in their decision making. In all such cases religions should play an intercessory role to influence nations to have a just and participative world order.

Our earth has enough resources to feed all. Yet the current world order enables nations with less percentage in population to consume the lion's share of the resources leaving others in poverty and inhuman conditions. If this is to be changed, there has to be a change in the very order of the world by transferring food, technology, tools, resources, etc., to the poor nations. But the reality is that the past colonial world continues to take away the resources from the poor countries to support its own industrial production. To rectify these distortions, religions, and more so Christianity, can exert their influence on these nations, also through the United Nations.

As the renowned Brandt Report has pointed out: "The world is now a fragile and interlocking system, whether for its people, its ecology, or its resources. Many individual societies have settled their inner conflicts by accommodation, to protect the weak and to promote the principles of justice, becoming stronger as a result. The world too can become stronger by becoming a just and humane society. If it fails in this, it will move towards its own destruction."¹² If religions cannot help the many who are poor, they can neither save the few who are rich. Religions must not only advocate aid, but must lobby for fair trade and that the nations of the North refrain from policies that make life more difficult for the people in the South.

George Thompson, a former regional commissioner of the European Economic Community, remarked how for an industrial worker in Hamburg to subsidize a Bavarian farmer was a fairly acceptable proposition, but that for an individual worker in Hamburg to subsidize a farmer in Africa required an immense imaginative leap.¹³ In this regard religions today can help their

adherents to be more sensitive to the more unfortunate people elsewhere. The guiding principle is not so much charity as justice. In order to conquer poverty and hunger and to create a more just and effective international economic system, the Brant Report advocates fundamental structural changes in the market in which “the developing countries are suppliers - of commodities, of manufacturers and of labour and in which they are customers – for capital and technology. Such changes are also required in the mechanisms and institutions which generate and distribute international finance, investment and liquidity.”¹⁴ In this, religions are motivated not solely in a transition from poverty to well-being but also of a greater human dignity, security, justice and equity.

The markets of the globalized world will not take care of the basic needs of the poor, primary health care and education. In this religions will be able to offer their help to the government. Through this, equal opportunities will be created. This will not happen by trickle down theories. Equal opportunities are to be given. Religions have a duty to create social consciousness among the non-poor. The poor are poor because they are denied the fruit of their labour and the product of their creativity. They lack the political power to challenge the prevailing practices of economic and social exploitation. We need power shifts. Contemporary analyses and investigations of the power groups that sustain poverty situations can be supplied by religions.

As opposed to a competitive and marginalizing globalization, we need cooperative and mutually inter-dependent globalization. This would lead to rectify inequality and exclusion. Cooperative globalization can stimulate the notion of global citizenship.¹⁵ While the world’s largest corporations account for 25% of the global economy, they employ only one-twentieth of one percent of the world’s population.¹⁶ In this context what we need are micro enterprises that can take place at the margin of the market economy, providing an income for an increasing number of people in the South. This requires micro-credits. Once again religions

must interpret the signs of the times in this concern for a just household, a just economy.

Part of creating a new world order is the impact of religions over globalization. In fact, globalization has brought a new perspective to religions. Hitherto self-contained and more or less homogeneous religious space has become opened up leading to increased interaction with others and causing more porous religious boundaries. Globalization must spur religions to seek the true *oikoumene*, the unity of humankind and of the whole inhabited earth with diversity. This vision of an ecumenical community must promote participation, equity, accountability and mutual interdependence. The challenge of globalization for religions is to see that globalization enhances the possibility of having fullness of life for all.

4. Religions as Non-Governmental Organizations

We are witnessing the phenomenon of a globalization from below through the efforts of the numerous Non-Governmental Organizations, with their protests and positive steps. In this scenario religions can assume more and more the role of NGOs and CSOs (Civil Society Organizations), without sacrificing their specific service to their adherents. They can provide an alternative forum and they can lobby and critique, confront and reflect on the world situation and problems.

Religions can work towards a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of the global society, with growing interconnectedness in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres. Thus they can usher in a global civil society, the space where people and transnational entities debate and negotiate the rules of their relationships and pursue accountability for those rules.¹⁷ Religions are social and historical expressions of the human search to relate to the Transcendent and are associated with the socio-economic and political power relations. Hence it is difficult to make a sharp dichotomy between the religious and the secular.

In modern times Mahatma Gandhi offers us an example of combining religion with political action.

5. Violence and Religions

In a world in which armed conflicts claim two lives every minute, violence has become something normal and endemic and not an aberration anymore yet except for some isolated reactions we persistently ignore the whole question. Violence has so become almost the face of the earth that we do not notice it any more though manifest in numerous ways such as the violence against the poor, women, children, the unborn, nature, the powerless, and so on. Undernourishment, starvation, unemployment, dehumanizing situations, are all the varied faces of violence. The Latin American Bishops' Conference, Medellin 1978 qualified Latin America as the continent of violence.¹⁸ I am inclined to think most of Africa and Asia and several parts of Europe also merit the sobriquet. What can religions do in the face of such all-pervading violence? It is not a question of pacifism but of enabling all to face issues squarely with honest and straightforward questions and actions. Non-violent action, as Martin Luther King described, is a crisis force whose aim is to bring a community to confront issues that it would rather avoid.¹⁹

Admitting that the existing religious and cultural plurality is fragile with a high potential for conflict, religions must make all out efforts aimed at shaping positive relationships between themselves. There has to be a culture of dialogue between religions. Religions cannot remain spectators of violence, far less perpetrators of it. They have to take active measures to overcome it. Religions have to speak out against all unjust and oppressive structures and violations of human rights in any form. Religions have to get actively involved with the victims and the perpetrators of violence, affirming a spirituality of non-violence and reconciliation. Each religion must cooperate with others in the resistance against the exploitation of religion in the interests of power struggles. Konrad Raiser suggests that, as opposed to the theory of just war, today religions must advocate a "just peace."²⁰

Thus religions must become instruments to create a world without violence and must spare no energy to build up a culture of peace. This is the challenge to religions in the new century. In this the structures of religions have an immense responsibility. Not infrequently, the followers of different religions are open to peace among religions and to accepting each other. However, these efforts are not sufficiently encouraged or supported by the official structures in the name of upholding certain traditionally held positions. This in turn becomes an obstacle to peace among religions, and thus to peace in the world.

Concluding Remarks

Religions can work towards a common ethic in the line of “The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions”²¹ that can form the basis for effecting an awareness about the lopsided economy, the disastrous environmental situation, the dangers to world peace, the need for the respect for every human person and the partnership between men and women. All religions must realize how “the world is in agony ... peace eludes us ... the planet is being destroyed ... neighbours live in fear ... women and men are estranged from each other ... children die.”²²

All religions must condemn poverty as well do everything possible to get it eliminated from the face of the earth, and work towards global solidarity and relatedness. Religions have to work for a better world order where the dignity of every human person is accepted and human rights are defended. In that world order freedom, justice, peace and ecological equilibrium become non-negotiable. Thus, religions can offer a vision to live in peace and justice with each other and with the earth.

Religions cannot solve the problems of the world by themselves. However, they can bring about an attitudinal change in their followers, and this can go a long way in the direction of dismantling prejudices and motivating people to live in peace and harmony. Realizing the present situation of violence in which religions are also attributed with having a leading role, they must take active

initiatives to resolve conflicts, to have tolerance towards each other leading to respect and collaboration. Every religion stands for overcoming egoism and reaching out to others. This probably is the greatest contribution that religions can make to the world, if they succeed in making their followers abide by these principles. Egoism engenders violence, hatred, revenge and torture. In all this, repentance for the past is obligatory for most religions. Religions must become channels of a new vision that in no way tolerate violence. We need a transformation from violence to peace, from hatred to love, from selfishness to other centredness, from hoarding to sharing, and from seeking prestige to serving. The world cannot be changed unless individuals are changed and individuals can be changed when religions go through a self-transformation in their vision. Every religion must imbibe a cosmic consciousness and unity. In summary, religions are the promoters of an authentic way of human life, and this is their initial vision as well.

Notes

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