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WHAT IT MEANS TO BE RELIGIOUS

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WHAT IT MEANS TO BE RELIGIOUS

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There is great misunderstanding both among believers and non-believers about what it means to be religious. For most of the believers religion is a set of rituals, appearance or even a set of dogmas and superstitions whereas for non-believers (rationalists and empiricists) it is nothing but irrational beliefs, dogmas and superstitions which impede human progress and also cause of violence and destruction. Even terrorism, they believe, is due to religion.

Then the question arises why millions of people believe in religion? The rationalists maintain it is because of illiteracy and irrationalism. But then many highly educated people also believe in religion so it is not easy to assign it only to illiteracy alone. And all those who believe in religion are not superstitious. Many of them are quite rational and even accept science and scientific methods without reservation. Sir Syed even maintained that there cannot be contradiction between word of God (Qur'an) and work of God (Nature and laws of nature). Moreover many great scientists have been believers in religion)

Then the question arises what it means to be truly religious? For ordinary people (including educated ones) religion is mixed bag. It comprises dogmas, customs and traditions which come from our culture rather than religion. Religion, once it becomes a powerful establishment, represents more of vested interests than religious teachings and values. It loses its dynamism. Interests become supreme rather than real spirit of religion.

Also, dogmas become more central than change as change for many believers bring a sense of insecurity and uncertainty whereas they believe in religion to ensure inner security. Also, dogmas ensure constancy of leadership as any change brings shift from orthodox leadership to modern leadership and orthodox leadership is better able to manipulate and control peoples for most people religion is a matter of belief rather than thinking and reflection.

In fact in its higher reaches religion is neither superstition, nor dogma and mere rituals. Religion poses problems when it is made to serve different human needs and interests. As water finds its own level, religion too finds its own level in unevenly developed society. For those who remain illiterate and backward it becomes a source of solace which is better served by dogmas and superstitions rather than thinking and change.

However for highly educated and developed sections of society it becomes a source of values and philosophy and invites them to reflect on God's creation. Qur'an repeatedly says why don't you think? Why don't you reflect on God's creation? Qur'an, if understood in its proper spirit creates intellectual ferment and dynamism rather than stagnation and dogmas. Dogmas were created by theologians and they put basic emphasis on these dogmas as they serve their needs and interests.

Also, for many, religion is ritual-oriented rather than value-oriented. By performing certain rituals and maintaining certain appearances they think they are religious. For many others, religion is a source of values rather than rituals. Rituals serve a sense of community and identity and often become mechanical exercises and hardly inspire any inner change.

Then how should one look at religion and being religious? There are five most fundamental qualities for being truly religious without which one can claim to be religious but can hardly qualify to be one. These four fundamental qualities are 1) constant quest for truth; 2) to be humble; 3) to be compassionate and 4) to be anti-establishment 5) to be transcendent in vision.

We would like to throw some light on these essential qualities to be religious. In every religious tradition God's name is truth. In Islamic tradition one of Allah's name is *Haq* i.e. Truth. Without being truthful and engaged in constant quest for truth one can hardly be religious. All great founders of religion from Buddha to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) spent years of their lives in quest for truth and got inspiration to understand truth. It should be mission of one's life to search for truth, in all its manifestations. Also, truth does not have one form and one manifestation. It is not stagnant or a dogma but dynamic and intellectually challenging.

2) Along with constant quest for truth humility is required. Any sense of truth being any ones monopoly leads to sense of arrogance and destroys the very quality of truth. That is why Qur'an says that All previous prophets came with truth and requires Muslims not to distinguish between one and the other prophets, those who do so are not true believers. All prophets and great religious thinkers were committed to quest for truth. Also, Qur'an maintains that Allah has created diversity, not unifr4moity so that one could understand different forms of truth without leading to arrogance. Anyone engaged in quest for truth has to have a quality of humility. Qur'an strongly denounces *mustakbitin* (the powerful and arrogant). Most of the Prophets mentioned in the Qur'an were of humble origin.

Third important quality for being truly religious is being compassionate i.e. being sensitive to others suffering. Anyone who is not compassionate cannot be a true human being, let alone religious. Allah's name in Qur'an is Compassionate Merciful (Al-Rahman al-Rahim) and Prophet Muhammad has been described as Mercy of the Worlds (*Rahmatan li-Al'amin*). Any Muslim who is not compassionate would never be a true Muslim.

Similarly a true religious person has to be anti-establishment as most of the establishments represent vested interest rather than values. Some people try to control these establishments and do anything to retain their control over it. They tend to become authoritarian and try to eliminate their rivals. Also, a truly religious person would always be inspired by future vision rather than what is given. He would be engaged in creating new world as what is given is never perfect. Those who have these qualities would indeed be really truly religious people.

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