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RELIGION, RADICALISM AND PEACE

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What happened the other day in Norway has not only shocked the world but also raised some important question. Does religion stand for peace or for murder? One thing is sure after 9/11 only Islam was being blamed for violence, war and jihad. Now it is obvious that such maniacs who go on killing spree are found in all religious traditions and even in highly developed nations. It is not only 'backward Arabs' or 'fanatical Islamists' who kill but even Christians from highly developed and democratic nations who kill innocent people.

Many people would readily blame religion for such killings but things are more complex. Religion is a tool which can be used for both establishing peace as well as for waging war. Much depends on either individual or on group with certain ideology one belongs to. Obviously all individuals do not kill nor do all groups adopt far right ideologies. Is peace more integral to religion or hate? Does one who hates 'other', loves one's own people? I do not think answers are as simple as we would like to be.

Religion can be what we want it to be. There are instances of religion being used for peace and also those of spreading hate. There are many deeply religious people who devoted their lives for the cause of peace and harmony. Foremost among them in our own times is Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. from USA. Gandhi stood for non-violence and so interpreted his religious tradition as well as other traditions like Christianity and Islam as to establish peace.

Similarly a Vietnamese Buddhis monk Thich Nhat Hanh firmly stood for peace in the face of horrible acts of violence committed by America in Vietnam. We often condemn those who use religion for killing others as fundamentalists but interestingly those who use religion for peace too make very hard use of religion and are, in that sense, no less 'fundamentalists'.

Interestingly Mahatma Gandhi also rejected a complete public-private split, stating " I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind, and that I could, and that I could not do unless I took part in politics…You cannot divide social, economic and purely religious work into watertight compartments." Iqbal too, an Islamic thinker, and by no means narrow minded Islamist, also said that if religion is separated from politics, what is left is Changezi.

Thus religious peace makers also want to use what we can call 'hard religion (as against soft one) to establish peace. Another good example is of Quakers. They have longstanding tradition of rejecting compromises with secular institutions such as the government. They refused, for the sake of peace, conscription in military services. They denounced slavery and refused to own slaves and use goods produced by slave labour and actively obstructed use of slave labour for building underground railways. Thus religious convictions must be actively used in public affairs.

Both those who use religion for peace and those who use it to perpetrate violence against the 'other ' are convinced of truth of their religion. They firmly believe their religion is based on 'divine truth'. It is the firm belief in 'divine truth' which motivates them to act. Then what is the truth of their 'Truth'? What is truth, remains an important question. Those who stand

for peace know that truth of religions is one. Divine Truth is manifested in different ways in different religious traditions. Truth of one religion cannot conflict with truth of another religion. Qur'an calls it *wahdat-Deen* i.e. unity of religion and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad devoted one whole volume on the nature of wahdat-e-Deen. Dara Shikoh also deals with it in his well known work *Majma'ul Bahrayn* (Co-mingling of Two Oceans – Hinduism and Islam) and shows striking similarities between Islam and Hinduism.

Nature of truth is very complex and it has to be understood more in action than in thought. Truth is more than mere empirical fact; it lies more in values. It may be combination of fact and value or at times only value, mainly spiritual value. It may be expressed either descriptively in human language or symbolically too. Those who hold strong conviction like Quakers express it more in action. Also it is more of quest than one time settled thing.

In engaged Buddhism non-attachment to ideas plays an important role. Thus one of the principles of engaged Buddhism is not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. All systems of thought are, according to this principle, only guiding means and not absolute truth. Also human life is more precious than any ideology, any doctrine. Humankind has suffered much from attachment to ideas or doctrines.

Thus idolatry is not only worshipping idols but also worshiping ideas and doctrines. Truth should be taken as process and a truly religious persons' life is devoted to its quest rather than its unalterable nature once for all. Different cultures and different conditions can produce different forms of truth or it may be put differently in different languages or cultures as Dara Shikoh has shown in his above mentioned book.

Qur'an also says Allah has created diversity and we must accept diversity as divine gift. The Norway killer was angry at multi-culturalism and many Europeans are not so enthusiastic about immigration and multi-culturalism. This creates narrowness and anger and explodes in violent form through some individuals or groups. The only remedy is to accept diversity and multi-culturalism as part of divine cre4ation and as divine gift. Also let us change our idea of finality of truth.