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Towards harmony between communities

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A community is a group of individuals. If we want to understand the significance of community, we must recognise that these individuals who constitute community are basically very unlike one another. In other words, one must accept that a community of individuals is basically one of diversity. I think it is tremendously important to understand that the underlying element of community is diversity. Take an individual - the individual is an entity with different attributes - physical features, mental capacities, aesthetic sensibilities, religious or spiritual aspirations and all that. And the community consists of individuals like this who themselves are a set of attributes, who are, in one sense, the personification of diversity.

There is a second aspect of community that I would like to touch upon, again from a common-sense point of view. You will notice that as an individual I belong to different communities. My family is something of a community - a very important community for me. The apartment complex where I live, that is a community also, although it is a different kind of community. The professional associations to which I belong - these are communities too - and the religious group of which I am a member, if I am a member, that is a community also. That is, if diversity is an important aspect of community, a second important aspect of community is multiplicity, variety of communities. We must recognise the existence of diverse communities within a society, a country or whatever it may be. Therefore, in real life we are surrounded by, we are members of, a multiplicity of communities, each one consisting of different kinds of individual members. Strange as it may appear, it is because of their diversities that individuals seek communities and create communities. For it is only in a community that an individual has a sense of belonging, a sense of identity, a sense of recognition.

Therefore, although a community consists of diverse individuals, these diverse individuals will themselves strive to achieve some kind of commonality within the community or for the community of which they are members. A community, if one may put it that way, is reconciled diversity, and this reconciliation of diversity may come by recalling traditions of the past, by subscribing to a common objective, but also through a series of practical arrangements, some mundane, some very obvious, but some not very obvious. One of these arrangements may be called authority. Authority has meaning or effect only to the extent that those over whom it is exercised accept it as authority. Indeed you accept authority because you know others will also accept that authority. So there are many ways in which the diversity within the community gets reconciled. This is a very tenuous way of existence. There will always be tension between the members who constitute the community, the individuals who constitute the community, and the community itself. Hence, I think it is important to think of community as a vibrant fluid entity-organisation, association or whatever it may be.

Let me now turn to a third dimension of community, which arises from diversity and multiplicity. If there are multiple communities, these communities will overlap also. Look at it from your own perspective. If you are a member of a large number of communities, there will be some overlapping among these communities of which you are a member. It is in the very nature of social relationships that while these relationships may be mediated through communities, the communities overlap. Hence, overlapping is a third feature of communities. Associated with this overlapping is what students of society would describe as boundary. Any community has a boundary, which sets itself as distinct from others or other communities. If there is overlapping, this boundary is bound to be porous and yet one of the features that we see in life is the tendency for the boundary to become rigid. A boundary, any boundary at all, will separate those inside it from those who are outside it. We may refer to it as "us" versus "them" or "us" versus "others". That is fine. But, when the boundary becomes hardened, the others become almost enemies. We become suspicious of them. We then begin to hate them. In this sense, communal harmony and communal discord are separated only by a mathematical line. As long as the boundary is porous, you can work towards communal harmony. If the boundary is made rigid, one can be sure that it is the beginning of communal discord.

Religion has certain positive attributes that can contribute towards communal harmony. Let me mention a few - I imagine that all religions fundamentally and basically will accept the equality of all human beings. This is a strong point that religion can emphasise in the search for communal harmony. Religions also speak about the need for transcendence, transcending all narrow boundaries, narrow loyalties, rising above all of these. This is another positive factor that religion can contribute. But religion can also become a corrupting factor in the search for communal harmony. How does this happen?

Consider first the accent on equality. While religions, in principle, or in the abstract, affirm the equality of all human beings, in practice, they set different standards. Most religions effectively give a lower status to women than to men, surprisingly in the very core of their activities, religious duties such as priesthood. Theological justifications have been put forward for claiming that human beings with certain skin complexions are superior to all others. Some religious doctrines consider people doing manual labour inferior to those who claim to work with their brains. According to certain religious considerations, people who by the accident of their birth belong to some geographical territories are more privileged than others. And most religions consider the adherents of their faith more equal than others! In practice, therefore, religions tend to betray the commitment to equality of all human beings that they claim in principle.

Secondly, while religions can contribute to the transcendence of boundaries, there is a tendency to say that that transcendence is not of this world, but of the world to come. Here on earth there are boundaries and tensions, but in the world beyond they would be overcome. In other words, religions spiritualise the concept of transcendence taking it away from the earthly realities, tensions and problems.

There is a third and, possibly, bigger distortion that religions bring about in matters related to community relationships. In one of his writings on the subject the theologian Wesley Ariarajah refers to religious traditions as “an intellectual dogmatic deposit that has become part of the understanding of life and reality”. This dogmatic deposit consists of converting all earthly realities into religious categories. Totally overlooking all other dimensions of human life, religions tend to reduce human beings into one-dimensional religious entities such as Christians, Hindus, Muslims and so on. And ignoring the many non-religious experiential shared spaces of these human beings religions tend to separate them into clear-cut communities, which can be only hostile towards one another. Sometimes, it may be, as a temporary expedient for easy identification, but when religious authorities give a label, whatever may be the purpose behind it, it sticks – communal boundaries become hardened on the basis of these alleged religious differences and tensions, and hatred begins to emerge.

It is because of these subtle and blatant distortions, which are all too common in our midst, that a proper understanding of community is a prerequisite to promote communal harmony. Let us accept diversity as the basic ingredient of community and so celebrate diversity. Let us, at the same time, strive to reconcile our diversities. Let us hold on to equality as the prime means to that reconciliation and justice as the binding thread. Let us recognise that each one of us belongs to a plurality of communities and while being loyal to our legitimate communities let us strive to transcend them without absolutising any. And, while we continue to dialogue our differences – for we are different – let us explore, expand and strengthen the shared spaces that unite us. Thus may we experience the blessedness that comes when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity.

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