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## **Hinduism in the Public Square**

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In ancient Greece, the agora or the public square was the space where the community gathered to discuss matters of shared concern. The public square was the vital center of civic, religious, artistic and athletic life. Although most nations today may not have an easily identifiable physical space for dialogue on matters of civic importance, the public square remains a useful metaphor for our reflection on the nature of dialogue among religions and for the dialogue between religions and secular agencies and world-views. We may think of the public square as the physical, psychological and, with the development of the Internet, the electronic space, where the significant issues of our common life are discussed and considered.

One of the most important and challenging features of our contemporary public square is that it is an intensely diverse one of religions, ideologies, ethnicities, and cultures. In ways unimaginable in the ancient Greek agora, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Zoroastrians and practitioners of indigenous traditions occupy our public square. Within every one of these traditions, there is also a diversity of voices.

The public square we are recognizing, slowly in some parts of the world, more rapidly in other places, must become an inclusive square where practitioners of all religions enjoy the same rights and privileges guaranteed by the state. This effort to create a legally inclusive public space is ongoing in many parts of our world, with greater difficulty and divisiveness in some parts than others. Many traditions are unwilling to relinquish hegemony in the public square.

This work of creating an inclusive public square where diverse religious voices enjoy equal rights and opportunities cannot be left only in the hands of the state and secular agencies. Religious rights and freedoms in the civic sphere are best guaranteed when the religious traditions sharing this space promote and articulate a theological perspective that fosters mutual respect and a value for religious diversity. The civic guarantee of religious freedom becomes more profound and meaningful when complemented and enriched by a theological affirmation of this diversity and a support for dialogical engagement among religions in the public sphere. The theological approach, while not necessarily conflicting with the legal, enables us to go beyond the legal and pragmatic and to affirm a value for religious diversity and interreligious dialogue that is rooted in the core teachings of our traditions. A civic affirmation of diversity that is not complemented by theological ones causes resentment and anxiety in the public square.

It is in this context that I will identify, briefly, six theological perspectives and values from the Hindu tradition that I believe can contribute to mutually respectful and enriching interreligious dialogue in the public square. I offer these with the self-critical acknowledgement that the tradition has not always faithfully adhered to these values and that some of these are shared with other traditions.

The first theological insight is the affirmation of the equal worth and dignity of each person in the public square. This dignity and value proceeds from the vision that every human being embodies equally and identically the divine spirit. An institution or religious leader does not mediate this divine reality and it is not circumscribed by religious identity, ethnicity or nationality. It follows naturally from the fact of the unlimited nature of the divine. In the public square, this requires a reverential respect for and attentiveness to every participant. Such mutual respect in the public square is quite different from anything that can be enforced or commanded legally. It is offered spontaneously from the heart that is awakened to seeing God in all.

The second theological insight from the Hindu tradition is the basic value for religious diversity. The different theological traditions in Hinduism are spoken of as darshanas or ways of seeing. Although ultimate reality, the one Being, is the common referent of these traditions, the different ways of seeing reflect the differences in our temporal, spatial, and cultural locations as well as our identities, individually and communally. Religious diversity is an expression of our human diversity and should not surprise us. This does not mean that our theological differences or particular commitments are unimportant. It does mean also that all ways of seeing are equally valid.

The third theological insight from the Hindu tradition is the necessity of humility when we participate in the public square. Our ways of speaking will, of necessity, be diverse as we use finite symbols to speak of

the infinite. The consequence is an epistemological humility. In the public square, this means that we resist possessive claims about the ownership of truth in its fullness and that we exemplify a humble openness to the voices and insights of others that fosters mutual learning. We resist the denunciation of other voices merely because these are not the voices of our own tradition. We learn to profess our commitment with openness.

The fourth theological insight from the Hindu tradition is the necessity for the practice of hospitality in the public sphere. The practice of hospitality is deeply valued in the culture of the Hindu tradition. Ritual worship in Hinduism is essentially the practice of hospitality to God who is thought of and honored as the supreme guest in our midst. This honor of hospitality is then extended to the human guest, in whom we are asked to see God, the supreme guest. In the public forum, hospitality means that the newcomer to the square is welcomed and valued and not regarded with mistrust and suspicion or marginalized for being a stranger in our midst. In the stranger, we recognize the presence of the One we value above all else. Hospitality offerings to God always include important life-needs such as food, clothing and water. This suggests powerfully that our hospitality to the stranger in our midst must include consideration for his or her survival needs.

The fifth theological insight defines the proper mode of religious sharing that occurs in the public square and there are two points to be highlighted here. The first is that religious teaching is imparted only in response to a request from the receiver for such teaching. Traditional Hindu teachers imparted instruction when requested to do so by their students. This approach minimized aggression and disregard for the religious needs of the receiver on the basis of apriori assumptions. Second, interreligious dialogue requires the mutuality of giving and receiving. It does not flourish if one partner thinks of himself as having everything to give and nothing to receive. The generosity of giving must be complemented by the humility of receiving. Dialogue is impossible if one's theological conclusions does not allow one to receive.

The sixth theological contribution from the Hindu tradition to dialogue in the public square is the necessity for a commitment to the practice of non-violence or ahimsa. Non-violence is regarded in the Hindu tradition as the supreme ethical value. The centrality of non-violence for the Hindu tradition is rooted in a vision of life's unity and the sacred worth of all beings. It is rooted also in the acknowledgement of our fallibility and limits as human beings. In the public square, the value for non-violence expresses itself in a mutual commitment to engage differences dialogically, to respect the moral integrity and freedom of those who differ from us and to refrain from the use of militant and threatening words and actions as tools of persuasion. The public square is a place for sharing and not the defeat and humiliation of those who disagree with us. A violent public square will never be a space conducive to interreligious dialogue and learning.

The contemporary public square is not to be thought of as " my square," or " your square," but as "our square." Excluding voices in the public sphere, done in the name of religion or secularism, guarantees that the public square will not be a place where the common good can be pursued in earnest. An exclusive public square cannot be the space where we pursue an inclusive common good. This can be pursued only in a public square where our commitments include a value for the equal worth of all human beings, humility, hospitality, non-violence, the affirmation of the value of religious diversity, and the willingness to give and to receive. The character of our public square is a responsibility that we all share and a precious legacy to future generations. It is sacred ground that we must enter respectfully.

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