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**MAINSTREAMING RELIGION INTO  
CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

**The Situation**

When the western world moved into the Modern Age, it replaced religion with science, dropped of faith and beliefs for liberalism and empiricism. Some, among the most zealous champions of the Modern Age, even proclaimed that humanity had finally come to age, leaving off its infantile needs for religion and God. These enthusiasts were so certain and optimistic that with the demise of religion and its instruments, the new rational beings would be at the pinnacle of humanity with all bondages broken, free to run their lives as they wish, and so would be happy and contented, for these people were convinced that religion and religious authorities, together with their instruments and mechanisms were the causes and sources of repressions, oppressions, subjugations, exploitations, victimizations, and all that are unpleasant in the life of a human being.

That was the vision and the optimism some three to four hundred years or so ago. Yet today, contrary to such a reading, we are witnessing how this Modern Age, with its new religion of liberalism and all its socio-politico-economic dynamics has led the world into a world order that is not only bewildering and chaotic but is also, in the ultimate, as oppressive, if not more, then the one before. Indeed, we bear witness today that the contemporary religion of liberalism with its doctrines of freedom of expression and human rights can be as intolerant, arrogant and prejudice. Just look at how the response was to the proposal for a curriculum on Intellectual Design in schools and the hullabaloo over religious attire for examples; if these are not echoes of the intolerance, high-handedness, repressions and oppressions of the politico-religious institutions of old, then what are they. This is not to mention how much more repressive and oppressive the instruments the clerics of the Modern Age employ to impose their beliefs and enforce their dogmas upon the non-conformists and the rebellious, in their so-called duties to democratize and police the world - through attacks, subjugation, sanctioning, threats, arm-twisting - all in the name of their missionary of goodwill and world order.

That the modern world and the modern beings today have achieved much in the field of the intellectual and the material cannot be denied; however they have also lost much in the field of the spiritual. The modern beings today have become spiritually hollow with an almost robotic persona and existence - the professionally perfect beings. Like robots, they program themselves into a routine existence - structured, professional, mechanical. Like robots, they do not possess spiritual existence, and thus there is a vacuum in their inner being. But a human being is not created as a robot, not meant and fashioned to be so; thus a human being is not a programmed being, to mechanically perform only. Rather,

a human being is created as a human being with physical, intellectual and spiritual dimensions and she or he has to attend to the needs of all these dimensions; otherwise she or he will feel unfulfilled and lost, uncomfortable with herself or himself, with the world and with life itself. Unfortunately, this is the current scenario, i.e., that the modern persons today, though they may be materially and intellectually fulfilled, are however, spiritually starving. Thus, it is not surprising therefore that in the midst of plenty, people choose to end their life, and in the midst of wealth, people suffer depressions - because they are spiritually vacant.

So, the modern world has not reached that utopia excitedly envisioned earlier - a happy, fully contented life, fair and just to one and all. On the contrary, this 21st century, as never before, is an epitome of the worst there ever were in the human civilizations - of violence, insecurity, disorder, injustice, exploitations, oppressions, victimization, fear - you name it. Though these evils had existed in the past too, they were, however localized and far-between, confined only to certain areas and affecting only certain communities. Today however, these atrocities are enveloping the entire world, ever spreading and ever engulfing almost every spot of the globe. If in the 18th century, Sigmund Freud, the Father of psycho-analysis, groused about "A Civilization and Its Discontent", than this 21st Century, portrays "A Civilization of Madness". Indeed, many of us are well aware of how mad humanity has become, and for many of us, we want to make a change; many want to return religion and spirituality back into our being, into our lives and our societies - yet again.

### **The Return of Religion**

That religion is making a come back into contemporary modern society, that is obvious enough, and its re-entry is taking many forms and shades. For example, in countries under foreign domination, in one form or another, religion is used as a retaliation power. This is because religion provides the people in such countries with a vision of a more dignified life, and with that too the justification and the motivation to fight and free themselves from foreign domination and control. In cases of the majority and minority situation, religion is a form of survival mechanism for the minority. This is because, more often than not, in such countries, communities are identified and associated with their religions, and in such cases, particularly the minority groups, they are pushed into becoming more attached and involved in their religious communities, and so will become more conscious and committed to their religion.

Yet there are also other reasons why people are turning back to religion, among which are the need to find more of one's self, to seek for answers of what life and death is all about, to find spiritual and emotional stability, or to get more than just what are there for the taking today - among others. In such cases as these, the seekers of religion and spirituality seem to have reached a point of understanding and insight that modernization with all its material achievements is not enough to provide happiness and contentment; that there is more to life and living than only these. Materialistic wealth can provide comfort to life, but it cannot provide satisfaction and fulfillment, as much as science can

provide the answers to the physical quests, but it cannot fill up the emotional, spiritual, and the metaphysical void; thus the modern person turns again to religion today to be fulfilled as a human being.

Then again, other than these situations, there are also those people who have always been attached to their religion, committed and loyal to their faiths, come what, come may, particularly in the East. Their hold on their religion today too comes in various manners and degrees. On the one extreme, there are those who stick to the very letter of their religion, with no adjustment whatsoever to fit into the contemporary settings, and thus reject modernization, and live in the mood and setup of the traditional culture. Then there are those who do adopt and adjust, and these come in different categories too. For example, there are those who adjust their religion to fit contemporary situations, and so re-interpret the teachings of their religion. On the other hand, there are those who adjust themselves, not their religion, to fit into the teachings of their religion and thus reject those aspects of contemporary culture that do not suit the teachings of their religion. Yet, there is also a fourth category of religious attachment, i.e., those who cling only to the spirit or essence of the religion, but reject the rulings and injunctions; for such, they want only spiritual attachment but not conformity.

Prominent, and at times even loud though the people of religion may be, however they are still very much in the minority, especially in the West, where modernization is so well grounded and religion has long retreated into the background. There also seem to be in the West a kind of nervousness about re-joining the band wagon of religion and there seems to be a lingering doubt if religion is at all relevant, and beneficial to human beings, not to mention if they are indeed real or authentic at all. For many with such minds, they do feel the lack of something in their lives, do understand that there should be something more, and that life can be better, and indeed, should be better than what it is right now, for the person and the whole world; yet they are not sure that the answer lies in religion. Experiences in the past, through their readings, indicate how oppressive religion and its institutions had been and so these modern persons are not that eager to bring such unhappy situations back into their lives yet again.

### **Religion of Contemporary Society**

Such being the state-of-affairs, for religion to make a come back into the mainstream of contemporary society, it should be a one that fits the modern person, the modern society and the modern civilization. It should be a religion that can fulfill the modern persons' spiritual thirst and yet at the same time should be able to sustain their intellectual development and enable them to enjoy and celebrate their material achievements. This is because the modern persons want to be religious as modern people. As such, the religion that will appeal to the modern people is one that possesses certain characteristics, among which are:

1. The religion should be a one that makes the person comfortable with herself or himself, and with others, the human and as well as the non-human

2. The religion should bring in a sense of fulfillment and contentment, of serenity, hope and cheer to the individual as well as to the society
3. The religion should not be too dogma-centered but rather should be a one that is more psycho-spiritual centered
4. The religion should be able to address issues of the spiritual and the next life as well as provide guidance for this earthly and contemporary life
5. The religion should allow for elasticity or diversity of choices within itself, and thus not too rigid so as to be stifling
6. The religion should provide the guidance, mechanism and dynamism to address contemporary life and character of this age
7. The religion should have both universal and particular dimensions and appeals
8. The religion should support universal values and principles of virtue and rights, for a just, harmonious and comfortable world order
9. The religion should have intra-personal as well as inter-personal dimensions and dynamics, to help develop the person as well as develop civilization
10. The religion should call for peace and the well being for all and sundry.

Most, if not all, world religions possess these elements in some measures or more, and in one way or the other. If a religion does not have them, then there will develop groups or sects within the religious community to re-interpret the doctrines and dogmas in ways that will accommodate at least the listed elements above, and so make the religion more attractive and relevant to contemporary needs and situations. Indeed, the growth of sects and schools in religions, among others, is due to the need to make the religions more functional and effective to situations of the time. It is only when flexibility and elasticity are absent in a religion that the dissenting elements in the community will go for a total break and convert into another religion, or alternatively, will form a completely new religion. Likewise, the formation of a new religion by combining assorted teachings from other religions is also mostly due to a quest for a religion that is really relevant and suitable to the contemporary life. However, there are also those cases, which are certainly not a few, where persons will leave their original faith for another for personal reasons or choices, including such as wanting a complete change of mood, such as from the too dogmatic to a one that is totally spiritual, for example, or for such personal matters as love and marriage.

Therefore, if a religion is to survive this contemporary time, and even more so if it is to expand, not only will it have to accommodate the needs and the tastes of this age, it will also have to discard those elements that are out-of-line with the mood and character of this era. Doctrines that are too complicated and tortuous, and dogmas that are too complex and convoluted, for example, will not appeal to the scientific, objective minds of the time, and will not fit in with the hasty, fast-track life of present day society. Religions that ride hard on people's conscience, making them feel perpetually heavy hearted and uneasy, always pounding on doom's day and hell-fire, will likewise not be attractive in comparison to those that are inspiring and psychologically therapeutic in essence. Also, religions that are too mythical and mystifying will also not fit well with the temperament of our time which favors a clear vision and understanding of things. Similarly, religions that are too structured and formal will also not appeal to the more liberal and

individualistic outlook of today's society, what more if the religions have overbearing and high-handed authorities lording over its fold.

In contrast to these items, religions which are more universal in essence and are more accommodative in nature, and more receptive to progress and development, do fit better in this age of globalization than those that are localized and inward-looking. Also those religions that open themselves out and reach out to all and sundry, and those that give more attention and concern to contemporary woes and plight, including such matters related to issues of justice, peace, rights, the environment, etc., by and by, will gain more followers as people today turn to, and search within religions, to find solutions to these on-going unresolved contemporary issues, seeing the failures of politics and politicians to address and solve these problems effectively. In short, religions that offer more of themselves to worldly human needs will find themselves more appealing and relevant to contemporary preferences.

It is also enlightening to people of religion to note that in the West the young are getting more and more interested in religion in comparison to their parents' generations. This is particularly obvious in the former communist blocks where the parents' generations had looked upon religions as the problems rather than the solution to their social plight, and thus turned to atheism as aspiration and hope for a better life. However, the present young generation has outgrown that hope and excitement, and on the contrary, is looking over and beyond atheism for a more fulfilling existence. Moreover, the young generations of today, are not witnesses to the pains brought about by the highhanded religious authorities of the past and the oppressive instruments and mechanisms that they used to enforce compliance and conformity to the religion, and thus the young of today are quite ready to embrace religion once again. This, however, does not mean that religion will be taken as what religion was before; rather, religion today will be given a new understanding so that it will fit with the thought patterns and temperament of this age. For those who are from atheistic family background, they are ready to learn and make choices, even to embrace those religions which may be quite different from that of their fore-parents. The jump-over will not be difficult for them since their families do not have, and thus are not entrenched in any particular religion. Moreover, those institutions that once controlled matters of faith and conversions, in such countries, also no longer have that power and grip to check conversion out of their folds.

### **The Relevance of Religion Today**

So what are the relevance, the functions and the contributions of religion today that it should make a come back, let alone be mainstreamed into contemporary society? If religion is to be understood only as a set of beliefs, doctrines and rituals, then indeed, it has passed its time since the modern persons have lost the mood for the dogmatic. Also, if religion focuses merely on matters of death and dying, then it will only be regarded as one more form of psychological blackmail, and can work only on a certain type of individuals who are psyche prone to the gloomy and the gloom. Likewise, if religion is all about abstinence only, then it will be seen to be over-bearing, and if it supports and

champions only matters of spirituality, than it will fail to attract those who care and strive for material gains and worldly successes too. But religion is more than just beliefs and the dogmatic, is not just about death, dying and abstinence, and likewise, as it offers space for the spiritual, it also offers space for the intellectual and the material, of the worldly, too.

Indeed, religion is as much about life and living as it is about death and dying, as much on the spiritual as it is on the physical, as much of this world as it is of the other world. Thus religion gives guidance, support, directions, meaning, visions and missions, and provides that balance which is needed to live a full complete, satisfying and meaningful life, fulfilling and enjoyable, comfortable with oneself and comfortable with all others and all else, the end result of which will also extend into the next life. It is only when religion is looked at from its broadest spectrum, covering both the particulars and the universals, that religion can be relevant, functional and contributory to all people and at all times, including, if not specially so, to this life today. In short, if religion is to be mainstreamed into contemporary society, it has to be given a comprehensive definition, and together with it, all that entail to that holistic definition.

To begin with, religion works on, and promotes, the dynamics of conscience in that it nurtures a high sense of good and bad, right and wrong, proper and improper, the virtuous and the base, the ethical and the unethical. Hence, religion guides on what is proper and appropriate behavior, personal and collective, private and public. Thus the dos and the don'ts of religion, in truth, are set up for the promotion of a healthy life and the wellbeing of both the individual as well as the society, and not, as often derided, as an attempt to curtail good times; indeed, too high on good time, as we now see, can result in backlashes which can even be self destructive in the ultimate. Propelled by a strong conscience, the persons of religion will tend to take accountability seriously. As such, they will not only look at their actions and deeds in terms of right and wrong actions, of proper and improper conduct, they will also look into the consequences of their deeds - will these actions actually bring good in the ultimate.

Taking it within this context, the persons of conscience will therefore not harm, victimize, oppress, or even humiliate or put another into difficulties, let alone exterminate a whole community, human or non-human alike for whatever purposes. Indeed, the people of conscience will not only act justly but also ethically. Thus, the people of religion, being guided by their conscience and holding seriously to accountability, will tend to affect goodness not only to themselves but also to others as well. Viewed from this perspective, religion is therefore a pro-active constituent both at the individual as well as at the societal levels, in that religion operates at the level of the individual in the forms of conscience and accountability, as well as at the level of the society in the forms of duties and responsibilities.

Thus, at the individual or personal level, in the light of conscience and accountability, the persons of religion will be conscious of how they relate to other people and other beings, of their responsibilities and duties to themselves, to their communities and societies, to the human world as well as the non-human world. Every action and deeds, for them, is

therefore accountable and therefore life is not viewed only as a personal existence, but also as a collective existence. As such, they will abstain from immoral behavior that can propagate not only social insecurity but also bring in social problems and diseases, epidemic or pandemic, including such as aids and the likes. Similarly, they will also refrain and restrain from doing the improper, such as to bring forth children into the world only to abandon them to the care of others, in the form of street children, for example. Every child has a right to care and affection, and people of conscience and a high sense of accountability will not indulge in such depraved and inhuman misconduct, to say the least about it. On the same note, their conscience and sense of accountability will also inspire them to relate kindly to other creatures, regarding these as fellow beings, and be more caring for the environment, viewing it as an earthly home for all. In the same note, they will also reject violence in society and will aspire to promote a state of harmonious and peaceful living environment.

For the individual, religion also offers that inner peace and sense of security, a psychological support mechanism that can help keep people away from such menaces as alcoholism, the taking of drugs, excessive smoking, and obsession with the sensual, as well as all other forms of self mortifying or self destructive habits, not excluding suicide itself. Moreover, religion also provides a form of psychological therapy that can pacify excessive sadness and anger, two of the most volatile emotions that can be destructive if allowed to develop and breed, leading into the possibility of both self destruction and the destruction of others. Indeed, religion, with its strong stress on love, affection, patience, forgiveness, forbearance, kindness, hope and optimism, of making good out of bad situations, is also a form of self-cure which helps people to accommodate and live through the pains of life, to grow stronger in the faces of tragedies and calamities, to be more humane and holistic in character, at the end of the day.

As a general rule too, religion transcends all divides - national, political, geographical, racial, color, language, culture, communal, gender, and even religious divides. Thus, at the universal level, religion tends to view humanity as a whole; it is therefore generally not selective, nor divisive nor sectarian in outlook and application, and that they address mankind as a whole, calling people to look not only within themselves to be good, but also to look outside of themselves to affect goodness in society and the world. Indeed, at the core of it all, religious ethics is, and should indeed be, a universal ethics; what is good for one, is good for all, and likewise, what is bad for one, is bad for all. In this context therefore, religion transcends and thus rejects all forms of snobberies, conceits and prejudices, even of religious sectarianism and divides. Indeed, it is not religions that divide; it is the hijacking and abuses of religions that divide, i.e., when religions are used to champion personalized courses, even for such as avenging wrongs. Therefore, what may be proclaimed in the names of religions, are often alien to the very nature of the religions so proclaimed.

Indeed, religion, by its very essence of love, compassion, kindness, and forgiveness, among others, is therefore actually antonymous to violence, and on the contrary, they actually promote peace, including world peace, something which the world is in very dire need of now. In truth, religion cannot but actually promote the wellbeing of one and all,

and advocate for peace - a life of peace, a culture of ethics and order, a civilization of harmony and amity, and a world order of justice and goodwill.

### **Closing Remarks**

Hence, all things said, religion is indeed functional and therefore is relevant today and deserve, nay even needed, to be mainstreamed into contemporary society. However, let it be reminded that religion, and religious sentiments, should not be overblown out of proportion for this will lead into forms of extremism and fanaticism, and all communities, without exceptions, have indeed witnessed and suffered through these problems, in one form or another, through the violent sentiments and acts of the extremists and the fanatics from within their own folds - political, ideological, national, racial, communal, tribal, and including of course, of religious fanaticism and extremism. Thus, the balance, or the equipoise, ought always to be maintained and sustained. To give an analogy - religion should be instated as near as possible to the balanced point between the two end swings of the pendulum; neither too far left, nor too far right.

Furthermore, in our excitement and conviction that religion should make a come back into human life once again, and that it indeed should be mainstreamed into contemporary society, let us however not overlook the fact that religious histories had been quite embarrassing, if not downright painful and horrifying too. Let us not forget this fact.

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