



RELIGION, POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY:A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

SHRUCHI SINGH

Research Scholar (Ph.D.), ICPR-JRF 2018-19 Department of Philosophy, Aligarh

Muslim University, Aligarh, U.P., India.

Email ID : shruchi0901@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper examines philosophy behind the effect and influence of religion on politics and democracy. An assessment shall be made in order to bring forward philosophy emerging from their interaction and probable union. This research is of immense importance in a country like India which is not only politically governed, is democratic in nature and structure, but also religiously pluralistic in its outlook, construction and heritage. With diversity in culture, religion and languages, it becomes all the more important for the philosophy behind them to come forward and take the lead. It is necessary because religious pluralism is both a political and social phenomena, which with increasing globalization, immigration and mobility; makes these factors philosophically important and necessary. It is so because pluralism deals with interactions between minorities and majorities, the sections of societies which are crucial and essential part of democracy and a point of concern in politics. Thus, the philosophical study of religion, politics and democracy together is essential in contemporary scenario.

Keywords: Religion, Politics, Democracy, Tagore, Gandhi, Iqbal, God, Philosophy, Pluralism, Qur'ān.

Introduction:

The three important arenas governing, influencing and structuring the lives of contemporary India are religion, politics and democracy. These are the three finely embedded, highly authoritative and often manipulated modes involved in our lives, both directly and indirectly. Religion is often associated with Divinity, grace, worship, right and wrong and good and evil. It is understood as a set of rites and rituals guiding us towards the ultimate goal of life, realizing the inherent bliss thereby giving meaning to our existence. It provides us guidance at several planes such as metaphysical, ethical and moral with occasionally scientific basis. It helps in the formulation of law and order with love, compassion, kindness, humbleness, truthfulness, trustworthiness, justice and sacrifice at heart. Thus, in order to build up the societal norms, moral order and ideal character, religion guides us efficiently on the proper functioning of the individuals and societies. It directs us for the actions which are necessary, absolutely forbidden, permissible and punishable. In short, it acts as the foundation and governing principle of individual and hence, of society by acting from the individual or bottom level to humanism or higher level.

However, in modern times, with the increased rate of interaction among various faiths, cultures, societies, nations; with the geographically far away cities being moments away due to high technological global networks; with globalization being

the new nationalism, it becomes necessary to understand the relationship of religion and politics. Politics, because it is the implementing element, under which policies and schemes are implemented for running and governing cities and nations, thereby extending its services from top to bottom. It is something where if morally and ethically efficient, righteous and self-sacrificing people are not present in governing positions, then the society gets infected with selfishness, pride, corruption, unlawful activities and chaos. This results in the annihilation of not only law and order of society, but also of principles and character of individuals. When this occurs, it results in the politics, not of issues, developments, well being of people and other societal concerns; but of ignorance, ego, segregation and of dragging people in the mud. Thus, in order to run a good politics, true religiousness is required which could result in the spiritually inclined selfless governments. Hence, it would be better to keep the religion and politics in a powerful conjunction with the dominance of true religion over politics. As a result, it is essential to study religion and politics in concomitance with special consideration to democracy. Democracy results when religiousness is the attitude and politics is for the service of people. In the contemporary scenario, democracy is also a requirement because it is the life-line of this globalized world, where no one can be spared from the cause and effects of actions of one nation and one ill thought off actions. In this paper, these aspects will be considered from the aspect of our modern India as it is not only a place of spirituality as per the ancient wisdom, but also a pluralistic society as per the religions, cultures and various traditions in addition to the world's largest democracy. It is the place where this plurality or diversity is not only embraced but also maintained and enjoyed in the form of unity being the essence of this country, thereby making it into a sort of mini world.

Religion

According to Frederick Ferré, one's religion can be defined as one's method of valuing intensively and comprehensively with utmost zeal.¹ Through his definition he made it clear that religion is about valuing alone, it is not about reasoning or holding any truth. Thus, he separates it from any particular notion of God, religious experiences, beliefs, rites and rituals as a qualification criterion of religion. In saying so, he covers every form of religion, be it theistic, atheistic, agnostic, pantheistic, skeptic, humanistic and so on. Thus, in order to understand a religion, it becomes important to realize the essence of religion, which according to Harald Höffding lies in the assurance of preserving the values.² With the values, it does not imply with the once formulated dogmas, but with the vital content of life which is behind these doctrines. Preserving or remembering the vital content of life is more important than the doctrines because doctrines are mere interpretations and adaptations according to varying belief and cultures, they entail the essence; they are not the essence in themselves. Thus, it becomes apparent that the main component or essence of religion is the life force behind its ethical system or value system. Thus, the doctrines, divine, rites and rituals and other religious symbols are fabricated in order to establish, cultivate, propagate, preserve and formulate the ethical and normative system. It is these valuable features which instead of several differences among various religions

head towards a universal essence. A brief idea of religion as stated in *Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs And Practices, Volume I: A–C* is, Religion does not just happen. Religions are created by inspired individuals, spread by faithful devotees, and structured so as to reach specific goals and serve the felt needs of adherents. Religious groups develop an economy to provide for the upkeep of facilities and sustain leadership as they pursue their spiritual visions. Some religions are more successful than others in each of these endeavors, relative success often being dictated by a more or less friendly environment.³

Thus, religion is an institutionalized body formed in order to achieve the objectives both as an individual and as a society by retaining the central value system. They aim towards establishing a democratic structure by maintaining a sustainable economy, growth, and environment while managing both material and spiritual aspects. Thus, religion is political in form when it wears the robe of realism and works for the people. It is political when it works on the societal level, influences the state's policies, directs the maintenance of law and order, maintains harmony even in a diverse nation. Thus, we can say that religion forms the backbone of politics, makes it handicapped when politics is carried out without imbibing religious ideals.

Politics

Politics, as defined in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy* is,

When we talk about *politics*, we seem to be talking about the way people come together deliberately to express their sense of how society should be run and to articulate their differences; and we are talking about the relatively formal practices and institutions of debate and conflict that make this expression possible. Because it has this formal and artificial character, both individualists and communitarians may view the realm of politics as something derivative, to be judged in terms of more fundamental values and ideas that are not themselves political.⁴

Thus, the sole purpose of politics is to come together for the proper functioning of the society, through proper discussions and debates while maintaining unity and integrity. It is a setup in which people belonging to various approaches, however divergent they are, can come together, discuss and take a decision for the society. Thus, we can say that both religion and politics cover some integrating stations of life and social setup. One emphasizes on a value system, the other tries hard on 'how society should be run'. Consequently, one works at the individual level while other works at the societal level. Usually, there wouldn't be serious issues with religion being practiced at the individual's level and politics running the society while keeping a check on people's well being. But when a society is religiously pluralistic, i.e., it has several faiths living in an area, then it becomes necessary to go beyond the boundaries of a single religion. Here conflicts may occur due to different beliefs and practices, due to harmful religious practices, superstitions, and religious blindness. The situation worsens all the more if the politics done is not a good one and is carried out for political gains. In such cases, religious tension is created, propagated and maintained. This religious tension creates several problems in maintaining communal harmony, peace, and brotherhood. Thus, in order to avoid this, a strong hold of pluralistic approach is

required, not only among various religious but also within the religions themselves. Thus, in a country same as India, where various religions reside, the need for religious pluralism, increases. It is required because; it aims towards providing genuine 'freedom' in the sphere of religion. Thus, any attempt towards reconstructing its meaning marginalizes it, thereby making it powerless and eventually affectless.⁵

Democracy

In a democratic society, it has become necessary to allow religious pluralism to take over in a positive and constructive fashion. An approach in which while maintaining religious diversity and religious inclusion, agnosticism and altruism can also be maintained. Altruism since it is the feeling and behavior governed by the desire of helping others while lacking selfishness, which is the need of the hour. Thus, with altruism in action, religious pluralism would become a completely refined, selfless practice in a democracy like India. Interestingly in *Encyclopedia of Time Science, Philosophy, Theology & Culture*, the probable outlook on which the structure of democracy, which is defined as 'government by the people' is articulated as,

Democracy is based on the idea of political self determination... when democracy is discussed, it is always necessary to explain precisely what form of democracy is meant: Are there limits to democracy, for example, in a body of regulations? Is democracy seen as an end in itself, or does it serve other (higher) purposes? Are democratic decisions the immediate expression of the people's voice, or is the people's voice mediated by representative institutions?⁶

Thus, it can be understood that democracy serves as the link between individuals and the political state. It may serve as the crossroad from where one can take a walk in order to erect the ideal city in accordance with the need of society. For this there is also a need to understand the political philosophy, which is,

the study of the nature and justification of coercive institutions. Coercive institutions range in size from the family to the nation-state and world organizations like the United Nations. They are institutions that at least sometimes employ force or the threat of force to control the behavior of their members. Justifying such coercive institutions requires showing that the authorities within them have a right to be obeyed and that their members have a corresponding obligation to obey them, i.e., that these institutions have legitimate political authority over their members.⁷

Since religion occupy a vast arena of our life, problems and curiosities, such as of other world and this world; of life and after-life; of ethical, political and social principles; of individual and societal life; of spiritual and material; of association and dissociation etc. Thus, they are the ones behind not only the religious rites and rituals, but also behind all the ethical, political, ideal and disciplined way of life and teachings. Due to this, they also affect the economic, civic, social, institutional life by creating a balanced setup for both individual and society. Thus, in a whole, it strives to maintain a democratic social structure by maintaining a sustainable life-style. Thus, the religious conviction in true sense cultivates morally upright political structure, which in turn a is key to the democratic structure.

Modern Indian Philosophers on Religion, Politics and Democracy.

Rabindranath Tagore

The philosophy which Sri Rabindranath Tagore followed throughout his life is humanitarian and universal in nature, having its origin in the foundation of life. For him man is not insignificant, he is God's representative. He says, "Whatever I can offer to God I offer to man and to God, I have whatever I can give to man I make God man and man God."⁸ This was his new religion, "Religion of Man". It is apparent that by equating man to God, Rabindranath Tagore saw immense possibilities in man, which according to him can be expressed completely by this religion. His religion is poet's religion, which like any institutionalized religion doesn't prescribe any path. It asserts on serving man as God and God as man, which forms the core of his philosophy. This is the very reason behind his definition of religion, which is not confined to any identity and dogmas. He explains it as,

Religion is not a fractional thing that can be doled out in fixed weekly or daily measures as one among various subjects in the school syllabus. It is the truth of our complete being, the conscious of our personal relationship with the infinite; it is the true centre of gravity of our life.⁹

He elucidates that religion is our essence, the component of our individuality; it is 'the truth', the fundamental nature which is common to all and hence, no synthetic religion can declare its monopoly over it; it is the medium behind the realization of our connection with the absolute Truth, the ultimate Spirit, the God. For this reason, religion not only gives meaning to our life but also forms its core thereby creating consciousness in our existence. "...this nationalism is a cruel epidemic of evil that is sweeping over the human world of the present age, and eating into its moral vitality."¹⁰

Since Nationalism is political in nature, Tagore depicts its eminent aspect. He supports nationalism but opposes its separatist structure. He is in disagreement owing to the lack of love for mankind which such a facet of separatist politics incorporates. It often fails to notice humanism for the love of their land resulting in a great never-ending menace. Its outcome is the suffering of civilization and loss of man's Divinity owing to the politically defined ethical and value system. Hence, politics in the absence of religiousness disintegrates to selfhood resulting in the creation of differences. These differences, if not taken care; prevents peace, happiness and harmony from spreading its wings.

With the loss of religion, universalism and moral virtues lose their ground, resulting in the deprivation of humanism and spiritualism from the political sphere. This loss results in the loss of democracy. It is so because, in a democracy, people are its governing, profiting and controlling aspect. As a result, in the irreligious politicized country due to restrained human rights; compassion, equity, sustainable lifestyle loses their hold, resulting in withered democracy. To protect and practice this democracy pluralism is needed, so as to accept the differences and rise above the separating differences. The following articulation by Tagore effectively portrays the idea of religious politics that is democratic and pluralistic in outlook,

Let what seems a barrier become a path, and let us unite, not in spite of our differences, but through them. For differences can never be wiped away, and

life would be so much the poorer without them. Let all human races keep their own personalities, and yet come together, not in a uniformity that is dead, but in a unity that is living.¹¹

Thus, Tagore propounds the faith which is true, divine, infinite, humanitarian and free from the notions of tolerance and intolerance.

M. K. Gandhi

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi philosophically stressed on realizing and practicing religious pluralism, for there is the presence of truth in every religion. It is this truth on behalf of which a pluralist embraces and integrates the differences, individuality and peculiarity; leading to the understanding of the basic unity of all beings. Another reason behind supporting religious pluralism was also that according to him, it is one's own personal sphere; consequently, there can be as many religions as there are individuals. Therefore, instead of converting to other religion, he asked people to make the religion they are born in better and acknowledge the presence of truth in other religions also. Besides, there's an important aspect which needs consideration, it is that religion cultivates the moral and ethical goodness in individuals. Religion also gives honor to the feelings of love, compassion, kindness, etc.; which in turn generate the sensibility of goodness and badness. He alleged:

No man can live without religion... Whether by reason, or by instinct, or by superstition, man acknowledges some sort of relationship with the divine. The rankest agnostic or atheist does acknowledge the need of a moral principle, and associates something good with its observance and something bad with its non-observance... even a man who disowns religion cannot and does not live without religion.¹²

Thus, he recognized religion with the basic universal order and inherent goodness. According to him it is an important necessary force at the individual level which cannot be discarded. Politically, it is this compassionate force, laying the foundation of *Satya*, *Ahimsa*, *Swaraj* and *Sarvodaya*. Gandhi after recognizing them, not only propagated them as essential principles, but also invented the method of *Satyagraha*, *Ahimsa's* action form which focused on achieving goals by generating compassion in an enemy's heart. Politically, this method relied more on enemy's goodness while upholding truth whilst maintaining peace, harmony along with equity and brotherhood. For political unity, Gandhi redefined and introduced the term 'Secular'. He did so because in the west the state is separated from religion, which has no relevance in India. In India, there was never a conflict between the religious and political bodies.

Thus, Gandhi believed that politics without religion collapses. He said that a religion which neither counts on practical affairs nor help in solving them is not a religion.¹³ Since religion serves as the fountain of essential value system, it helps in keeping intact the political behavior of both politicians and masses. Thus, he stressed on spiritualizing politics by recreating the notion of secularism. Secularism, which he maintained by observing religion as the personal affair of individuals, a state not identifying itself with any religion and, all religions enjoying equal status in society.

Political power means capacity to regulate national life through national representatives. If national life becomes so perfect as to become self regulated, no representation becomes necessary. There is then a state of enlightened anarchy. In such a State everyone is his own ruler. He rules himself in such a manner that he is never a hindrance to his neighbour. In the ideal State, therefore, there is no political power because there is no State. But the ideal is never fully realized in life. Hence the classical statement of Thoreau that that government is best which governs the least.¹⁴

By strengthening the population at the root level, making it self-efficient and also self-regulatory, political democracy would be attained. In such a democracy, each and every individual would be ruled by himself without harming anyone. Such a structure is important because real democracy cannot be maintained by fistful people seated in the centre. It needs to be worked at the ground level by each and every individual. This strengthens the democracy, which arises from the well-rooted religiousness, filled with righteousness and the spiritually inclined politics aiming towards well being of every individual.

Thus, Gandhi views religion as universal, the basic force active at individual level safeguarding him morally, making way to religiously inclined politics which is democratic in nature. He suggests the effective working of a political state from the basic unit of a nation, which could strengthen its fabric making it immune to religious, political, democratic unrest.

Muhammad Iqbal

Iqbal's philosophy is the philosophy of '*Khudi*' or self, in which he emphasizes on creating God's attribute in oneself. He believed that faith functions as security whereas adherence to religion as life. In his time, Muslims were lagging behind and were facing several problems, thus in order to unify he stated, '*Haram-e-paak bhi Allah bhi Qur'an bhi ek, Kuch bari baat thi hote jo Musalman bhi ek.*'¹⁵ Thus, he wishes and urges all the Musalmans to be one and stand up for each other in order to regain their past glory. As a nationalist, he urged to maintain religious pluralism with brotherhood while stating, '*Mazhab nahin sikhata aapas mei bair rakhna, Hindi hai hum vatan hai Hindustan humara.*'¹⁶ He recognized religion as a unifying tool which can be used for the development of the people and the community as a whole. Besides being completely influenced by Islamic culture, its value system, ethical system and brotherhood; he stressed on establishing Islamic culture and political system in order to ascertain good governance and all round development.

Politically he believed that the prosperity and death of a nation are in the hands of politicians. Thus, for appropriate governance, which could inhibit the vices from taking hold, he took a religious political stance and supported Qur'anic form of democracy regarding it as a political ideal. He further supported *tauhid*, i.e., the oneness of God and said, its essence as a working ideal lies in equality, solidarity and freedom. These are the very pillars on which democracy stands. Thus, his political philosophy was entirely Qur'anic in nature. It is so because he didn't go down well with the western notion of democracy which he defined as rows. Additionally, he called it a system where people are counted, indicating towards the individuality on which it rests. Numbering is a material fact, which removes the possibility of being

weighed. Due to this, an essential error incurs which neglects the spiritual necessity. Spirituality according to him is a much higher and important element of being and his individuality. While supporting Qur'ānic democracy, he referred to the endless debate and controversy the western notion of democracy involves. He warned,

Democracy lets loose all sorts of aspirations and grievances which were suppressed or unrealised under autocracy; it arouses hopes and ambitions often quite unpractical and it relies not on authority but on argument or controversy from the platform, in the Press, in Parliament, gradually to educate people to the acceptance of a solution which may not be ideal but which is the only practical one in the circumstances of the time.¹⁷

As visualized, these anarchic tendencies are the very things which are nowadays posing a threat to democracy leading to unreasonable actions by masses. Thus, Iqbal asserts on the Qur'ānic adaptation of religion and politics, which is religiously democratic in nature. He strives to achieve development and evolution for his fellow brethren through religious and spiritual unity involving Islam.

Conclusion

Spirituality is the basis of traditional Indian philosophy, which can be observed in contemporary India's religiously pluralistic attitude, secular outlook and democratic unity. In the present state of affairs with the diminishing fascination of knowing the 'truth' in religions; superficial religion's influence on individual, of individual on politics, of politics on nationalism, and of nationalism on democracy in a negative light is mostly observed. This lack of knowledge leads to the aforementioned philosophers fears such as, the slaughter of ethical and value system, emergence of orthodoxy, discrimination, intolerance, religious exclusiveness coming true. Due to this, instead of understanding others, their religions, way of life; we are facing the need of 'tolerating' them as an alternative of celebrating these diversities and differences. Since due to diminishing hold of religion; moral, ethical and value systems are degrading, degradation in every sphere of life has occurred. This degradation has lead to the degradation of issues, virtues, responsibility, maturity, and claim of reality. Today due to these factors, politics is gaining an upper hand without the assistance of true religion, which is disrupting the effective functioning of a democratic system. This improper functioning is the key to the political epidemic, which sweeps out all the democratic systems giving rise to anarchy and fake religiosity and segregation. Thus, once again the realization of true religion is required which can help in building up morally and ethically strong individuals of such a strong stature who could govern themselves with proper social responsibility. This would give rise to humanism, universalism, and brotherhood along with the political ideal. This political ideal, created by true religious ideals, would give rise to the religious form of democracy by eliminating the separatist form of governance. For this, a thorough philosophical perception of religion and politics is required, which would give rise to true religious democracy instead of false beliefs, superstitions, and divisions.

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