

Religions and Being Religious

SUJATA MIRI

On being informed that so-and-so is a "religious" person, I might naturally ask the question, "what religion does this so-and-so belong to?" and expect an answer specifying one of the "recognised" religions, e.g. Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. If I ask this question, my assumption would be that one could be religious at all only within the framework of the form-of-life of a particular religion. But this assumption seems to be wrong. There seems to be a sense of the term "religious" in which a person could be quite understandably called "religious" without it being either necessary or possible to identify him as a Christian or a Hindu or a Moslem and so on. Being a Christian or a Moslem, for instance, involves one's holding certain very specific beliefs about the past and the future of man, apart from being committed to a certain way of life whatever that might mean.

To be religious without being religious in the way of any of the particular religions should therefore imply that (1) such a person does not necessarily share any of the *specific* beliefs associated with these religions and (2) that he need not lead a life which is recognisably a peculiar way of life prescribed by any of these religions. Being religious definitely entails a commitment but a commitment to what? An answer to this would be the main theme of my paper.

Let me begin this exercise by first describing the non-religious person.

There are those who under the influence of positivistic thinking have committed themselves to the "scientific world view." The "scientific world view" can be very briefly characterised as follows:

- (1) All phenomena must be ultimately reducible to physical phenomena (as conceived from time to time by the

science of physics).

(2) Mental or spiritual phenomena, if they do not seem to be capable of being reduced to physical phenomena, must be thought of as aberrations in the way of a "rational" understanding of the world. In no case, must it be thought that a coherent explanation of all phenomena might be possible in terms of the spiritual.

(3) The paradigm of the scientific method (and therefore of rationality) is the inductive method, i.e. the marshalling of empirical (discrete) observations in support of a general (also empirical) proposition.

They are of the view that scientific thinking is the only form of thinking which can exhaustively explain all things, including human activities. Consequently, for them there cannot be any essentially "religious" meaning of human activities. All activities springing from religious motivation must either be misguided or false (Marxism) or must have motives which have nothing to do with religion at all (Psychoanalysis). A lot could be said about the legitimacy of this stand as also the criteria of meaning and rationality implicit in it, but I think I would be digressing too far away from the main theme of my paper, if I go into further analysis of this position. My purpose is served if it is accepted that there is a class of people who commit themselves totally to, let us say the "scientific" world view, and thus are non-religious.

As against this there is a large group of people who, in spite of the advancement of scientific thinking, identify themselves with a "religious world view." They regard scientific explanation as useful but incomplete. Here let me make a clarification. It is not necessary for every scientist to be a non-religious person. It is only when science is taken as the only legitimate mode of explaining and *interpreting* phenomena, i.e. the contention that it is science and scientific explanation which says *everything* that can legitimately be said about the world, man and society, that the religious can be viewed as dissonant with scientific thinking.

When I say that "I am religious," I am saying (a) that scientific explanation cannot "exhaust" the human situation and (b) that everything, be it nature, man, society, is imbued

with religious significance for me.

For a religious person or a religious society all crucial human activities must spring fundamentally from religious motivation. A religious person's relationship to others in society, to nature and, above all, his own self-awareness can never be finally divorced from his religious visions. Of course, many of his daily activities may bear substantial resemblance to those of a non-religious person. But the former must find their ultimate justification in his religious vision (sacred).

On the other hand, for a non-religious person, the concept of the religious can have only a distorted application. I can make it clear in the following way. For a person who is non-religious, allegedly religious motives for action are suspect in one of the two ways:

(1) They are based on false beliefs, and activities springing from them must be fundamentally misguided. Modern humanists will fall under this group.

(2) There is the view that it is impossible to determine the truth or falsehood of the beliefs behind religious motives, but activities allegedly springing from religious motives can be explained exhaustively in terms of motives and functions which have really nothing to do with religion at all. Freudian psychologists, Marxists and the general run of modern sociologists will fall under this group.

The important point, however, is that for both these groups of people, the concept of the religious will have a profoundly different use from that which it has for the religious person himself. When I make the statement: "I am religious," I belong to the group who accept religious motives as unquestionably valid, it is these that give religious activities their essential meaning. For the humanists, on the other hand, since the so-called religious motives are based on false beliefs, the religious person is necessarily deluded, all religious activities are at best pointless. When a person sees through this delusion, he will also see that there is really nothing which can properly be called truly religious. Or consider the psychoanalyst. For him the religious motives, although they may be acknowledged consciously, cannot really be the genuine motives of any action.

Motives are always essentially non-religious. So we must also say that no human activity can have a truly religious meaning.

Yet the psychoanalyst or the sociologists *claim* to investigate the *nature* of religious phenomena. However, their criteria of identity for the religious must always be external. That is to say, the object of his study is something that is supposed to be religious although it cannot have for him what is called a "genuinely religious significance."

If my claim that "I am religious" is to be taken seriously, it must be conceded that (a) for me and other religious persons all things have ultimately religious significance. That is, however, not to say that my life does not resemble the life of a non-religious person. Indeed many of my daily activities might bear substantial resemblance to those of a non-religious person, e.g. the daily ritual of a morning bath may be common to both a religious as well as a non-religious person. However, in the case of the former, this activity too must derive its ultimate justification in his religion.

This kind of commitment to the "religious" may or may not co-exist with its expression in any one particular religion. One example of such a commitment which is not at the same time a commitment to any particular religion may be found in Nietzsche. Here of course it is coupled with a vehement rejection of a particular religion, namely, Christianity. Because of his rejection of priestly religions, students and commentators on Nietzsche come to the hurried conclusion that Nietzsche is an atheist, definitely irreligious. It is because of his essentially religious spirit—what I have called commitment to the religious as opposed to a particular religion—that Nietzsche can say:

A people which still believes in itself also has its own God. In him it venerates, the conditions through which it has prospered, its feeling of power on to a being whom one can thank for them.¹

The religious here is a "form of gratitude." One is grateful for oneself. To express this gratitude one needs a God, a

¹*The Twilight of the Idols and Anti-Christ*, p. 126.

God who is good and evil for, "of what consequence would a God be who knew nothing of anger, revengefulness, envy, mockery. . . ? To whom even the rapturous ardeurs of victory and destruction were unknown?"² Such a God or Gods may have different names, may take different cultural forms, may have wonderfully varied personalities—but all that makes little difference to the religious spirit.

There are times, however, when, according to Nietzsche, the religious spirit degenerates from a life-affirming exuberance to a life-denying submissiveness: "when a people is perishing, when it feels its faith in the future, its hope of freedom vanish completely, when it becomes conscious that the most profitable thing of all is submissiveness and that the virtues of submissiveness are a condition of its survival, then its God has to alter too. He now becomes a dissembler, timid, modest, counsels 'peace of soul', no more hatred, fore-bearance, 'love' towards friend and foe. He is continually moralising, he creeps into the cave of every private virtue, becomes a God for every body, becomes a private man, becomes a cosmopolitan. . . . Formerly, he represented a people, the strength of a people, everything aggressive and thirsting for power in the soul of people: now he is merely the good God."³

The religious spirit at its exuberant best coincides in a people with what Nietzsche calls the God-creating force. However, the moment this force binds itself within the frame of a particular institutionalised religion it tends, on the one hand, to degenerate into a static, force clinging to unproductive dogmas, and on the other hand regards itself as the ultimate for human salvation for all times. Instead of regarding a religion as one culture's expression of the creative urge (for that is what the different religions ought to represent) it gets busy counting the number of its believers. The ideas of priestly functions, propagation and conversion begin to occupy the core of such a religion.

According to Nietzsche, it is this degeneration of the religious spirit which in the case of Europe has failed to create a God⁴ and ended up in a fanatic clinging to a particular formu-

²*Ibid.* ³*Ibid.*

⁴"Almost two millennia and not a single new God." (Nietzsche)

lation of the religious.

My point about the religious person, I think, is beautifully illustrated in the following words of a Red Indian Chief⁵: "The great Chief in Washington sends words that he wishes to buy our land. . . . How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. Yet we do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can you buy them from us. *Every part of this earth is sacred to my people.* Every shining pine-needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people."⁶

There are, it seems to me, two distinct intellectual as well as perhaps moral advantages, in being *religious* without being committed to any particular religion. (1) One can be genuinely tolerant towards all religions and regard them as different but equally legitimate ways of finding meaning in life. And this tolerance would extend not only to the doctrinaire religions but to religions such as those of the tribal people. (Perhaps a person belonging to a tribal religion is also in an equally advantageous position to exercise this kind of tolerance because of the fact his religion is unfettered by dogmas which he is intellectually committed to defend.)⁷

(2) One could also naturally arrive at the position that the various religions do not form a hierarchy where they can be arranged in order of superiority of one over another. Questions of superiority or inferiority need not arise at all except within the context of *a* particular religion. In fact, when different religions are seen just as *different* ways of articulating man's ultimate concerns with himself, others, and the other world, it should, it seems to me, naturally lead to the idea that there *cannot* be any yardstick whereby one can pronounce one of these ways as superior to another and vice-versa.

The doctrinaire religions have somehow led their adherents to the view that they are somehow ahead spiritually and otherwise of the tribal religions. Unfortunately, thanks to the

⁵See p. 28.

⁶See p. 29.

⁷The Indian Chief—Our God is the same God. . . .The earth is precious to Him. Even the white man cannot be exempt from the common destiny.

arrogance of the so-called “advanced” religions, there has somehow been planted in the tribal elite mind the idea that belonging to a religion without an articulated doctrinaire edifice, or being just religious without belonging to one of the “religions,” is somehow to lack in civilisation with the result that the tribal population is (a) either hurriedly associating itself with any one of the doctrinaire religions or (b) working hard at building up a system of its own to counteract the other theologies.

I am not here advocating the abandonment of doctrinaire religions in favour of (what someone might characterise my position as) adoption of a religious attitude. My point is rather a philosophical one. The so-called advanced religions may contain within themselves strong self-laudatory and condemnatory compulsions. And this may create a situation which may run counter to some man’s fundamental moral intuitions which in its turn may produce moral tensions within these religions themselves. Perhaps it is possible to find a solution to these problems within the framework of each of these religions. If there is, then I would regard it as the most important task facing theologians today to try and find those solutions. However, the point which I want to emphasise is that the person, whose religiosity does not depend upon his commitment to any of these religions, is free from such moral and intellectual embarrassment.*

*In 1855 President Franklin Pierce of the United States made a “request” to Chief Sealth of the Suwamish tribe of Indians (who, live in what is now the State of Washington) to “sell” his land to the government. In reply, Chief Sealth sent the following letter to the President:

“The great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. The great Chief also sends us words of friendship and good will. This is kind of him, since we know that he has little need of our friendship in return. But we will consider your offer, for we know that if we do not do so, the white man may come with guns and take our land.

How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. Yet we do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can you buy them from us? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark

woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people.

We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of the land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night, and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert. The sight of your cities pains the eyes of the red man. But perhaps it is because the red man is a savage and does not understand.

If I decide to accept I will make one condition. The white man must treat the beasts of this land as his brothers. What is man without beasts? If all the beasts were gone, man would die from great loneliness of the spirit, for whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man.

One thing we know which the white man may one day discover: our God is the same God. You may think you own him as you wish to own our land. But you cannot. He is the God of men. And this compassion is equal for the red man and the white man. The earth is precious to him. The whites, too, shall pass perhaps sooner than other tribes. Continue to contaminate your bed and you will one night suffocate in your own waste. When the buffaloes are all slaughtered, the wild horses all tamed, the sacred corner of the forest heavy with the scent of men, and the view of the ripe hills, volted by talking wires, where is the thicket? Where is the eagle? And, what is it to say good bye to the shift and the hunt? The end of living and the beginning of dying.

There is no quiet place in the white man's cities. No place to hear the leaves of spring or the rustle of insect wings. But perhaps because I am a savage and do not understand. The clatter only seems to insult the ears. And what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lovely cry of the whippoorwill or the argument of the frogs around a pond at night? The Red Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind itself cleaned by the midnight rain, or scented with a pine. The air is precious to the red man, for all things share the same breath, the beasts, the trees, the man. The white man does not seem to notice the air he breathes. Like a man dying for many years, he is numbed to the smell.

We might understand if we know what the white man dreams, what hopes he describes to his children on long winter nights; what visions he burns into their minds; so that they will wish for tomorrow. But we are savages. The white man's dreams are hidden from us.

And because they are hidden, we will go on our own way. If we agree, it will be to secure our reservation you have promised. There perhaps we may live out our brief days as we wish. When the last red man has vanished from the earth, and the memory is only the shadow of a cloud moving across the Prairie, these shores and forests will still hold the spirits of my people."



The seminar began with the two papers dealing mainly with the philosophical issues involved in the idea of plurality of co-existing religions. Both these papers made an attempt to distinguish what the author of one paper, K.J. Shah, called the "Truth of living" embodied in religions and the network of theories and rituals associated with different religions.

All religions lay emphasis on the "Truth of living" which eventually consists in allowing all individuals to grow, to allow each to develop and realise himself or herself. Of course, "whether you would be what you should be is left to you" (K.J. Shah) for the realisation of the truth of living excludes the possibility of one individual's being overwhelmed by another.

It is, however, possible for a *merely just*, or, in other words, a merely moral man (and not necessarily a religious man), to attain the truth of life. The distinction between the moral life and the religious life has to be there, even though very often the two go together. But it is very difficult to make a water-tight division between the two. One might say that the truth of living can be attained through meditation. But this is only partly true. While meditation might help one discipline oneself for spiritual growth; the latter also requires disciplining one's relations with others. Meditation is an important element in all religions while disciplining one's relationship with others is primarily a moral matter. It is both these factors taken together that help one to attain self-realisation. Nonetheless, the fact remains that while one man can

be termed as merely moral, another may be called both moral and religious.

“Is not religious experience always mystical?” (J.D. Mehra). “No” (K.J. Shah). Besides this kind of experience there is also another form of religious experience. To try to get rid of one’s own helplessness in one’s relationship to one-self, and to others as well as in one’s relationship to the non-human world is a religious experience which is also a truth of living. Mystical experience being private is rare; as being private, therefore, is more open to misinterpretation and misunderstanding by others while “getting rid of one’s feeling of helplessness” is more common amongst different people and thus can be a real ground of fellowship amongst different types of religious people.

Then again, one could be a religious person without having a mystical experience, for as the author of the paper *Religions and Being Religious* has pointed out, being religious consists in being committed to a certain set of values, to a particular type of world view. “When I say that I am religious I am saying two things (a) I am declaring that the scientific explanation does not exhaust the explanation of phenomena and (b) I am also stressing that *everything* is imbued with religious significance for me” (S. Miri).

In this sense one could be religious without belonging to any of the recognised religions. One who is committed to a particular set of beliefs, for instance, a Muslim or a Hindu, may belong to a religion but may not be religious in the above sense. “I think we can draw a distinction between (a) subscribing to a particular theology and the way of life of an organised religion and (b) just accepting the world as imbued with religious significance” (S.N. Mahajan). Those who accept the second alternative (b) are generally those who avoid any commitment to any *one* form of religious theodicy.

But, “religion is a social force and it is only the organised religions that can serve as this force” (J.L. Roy). “There is no objection to a religion being organised. The objection arises, only if it lays heavy emphasis on its own interpretation of God, man, etc, as the only true interpretation” (S.N. Mahajan). Consequently, the manifestation of the ultimate truth, as they envisage, through their rites and rituals are also

believed to be the correct manifestations. Now rites and rituals are undoubtedly an important part of any religion (as pointed out by N.M. Malla), they have to be followed within the framework of one's own religion. "Criticism of any rite or ritual should be within the framework of one's own religion" (S. Miri).

Why is there this insistence on distinguishing between belonging to the organised religion, and choosing to be outside the framework of any doctrinaire religion and yet continuing to be religious? This could be for two reasons. (1) Very often an organised religion, we find, gets corrupted on account of various extra-religious forces working on it; dissociating oneself from this type of corruption could consist in desisting from certain rituals and beliefs of that particular religion.

(2) The second reason why one wishes to dissociate oneself from any organised religion might be that at some point in one's life one finds its rituals, symbols, etc (which play a crucial part in that particular religion) to be irrational. "Now it is here that we have to be careful in considering the nature of rationality. Especially if, by your criteria of rationality you are condemning one set of mythology as true and another untrue" (K.J. Shah).

What we should aim at today, in India, is the goal of fellowship amongst different religions and not merely a dialogue between them. To the question "can there be fellowship without dialogue?" (Kanito Sema), the answer was clear and emphatic: dialogue presupposes fellowship. In the absence of fellowship, dialogue can serve no purpose. The word dialogue has presuppositions which are unsatisfactory. Emphasis here frequently is more on conflict than on unity. The stress ought to be on a feeling for unity in diversity. Hence, fellowship is undoubtedly more important for religion, as the difference in religions are not the difference between truth and untruth, but between different instances of the same truth. If differences of theories cause differences in the truth of living, "I want to suggest anything that would make the truth of living different cannot be religion" (K.J. Shah).

Moreover, every religion must be regarded in terms of its best representation, for the essence of religion lies not in theory but in living. "For instance, if you want to understand

Naga or Mizo religion, look for a great Naga or a great Mizo in whom the highest potential of the truth of living of that religion is realised, and, who at the same time is recognizable by any intelligent and sensitive person as a great human being” (Mrinal Miri). There are and there will be several religions, but what is important is to have faith in unity. This faith (call it universal religion, if you like) need not preclude the particular religions.

Of course, if a particular religion needs a more sophisticated theory, “its cosmogeny can be improved by another religion” (Ringu Tilkü). That is not to say that its theory be sacrificed to serve the purpose of another theory. “No one theory is superior to another” (K.J. Shah). As Nietzsche has discussed each culture has its own vision, its own creative force, its own God. Of course, one culture can get a sophistication in theory as time goes on, for instance, the concept of U blei in Khasi religion. However, to insist on one God for all cultures and all times is doing injustice to the God-creating force of a particular culture. Hence, the question (of Kanito Sema) “What is the use of creating a new God when the old God is there?” does not take individual cultures and their urge for creation at par with the doctrinaire religions. For Nietzsche, as said earlier, the creative urge of tribal cultures culminates in the birth of its own God. “Now what about conversion? Is not conversion necessary?” (M. Horam). If the above discussion holds and if it is accepted that no religion is superior or inferior to another, “then there is no need for being converted from one religion to another” (K.J. Shah). However, if conversion is taken to mean fellowship then there can be no objection to conversion. The ideal practical relationship between a plurality of co-existing religions is possible only if there is a pre-existing fellowship between them.