

LOYALTY TO GOD AND SPIRITUAL VALUES

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At a time when religious dogmatism and narrow parochialism seems to be sweeping across the world, it is refreshing indeed when someone stands up and declares the unity of religion. Too often we have heard that there is only one answer to the world's problems, that the religion one professes alone has all the answers, that the believers of other religions are misled and deluded. The Buddha repeatedly reminded his followers not to condemn others' beliefs and praise one's own. Following in his example, the Emperor Asoka also asserted the unity of religion as did the Emperor Akbar in more recent times. The Buddhist attitude is not to ridicule or condemn but to discuss others' beliefs with tolerance and without hostility, to present their point of view rationally and without fanaticism. The following article by Dr. Chandra Muzaffar is reprinted from The Star newspaper 8th APRIL 1985, with the author's kind permission.

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What began as a simple query on whether certain terms associated with Islam could be used by non-Muslims has now developed into a discussion of the differing conceptions of God among the various religions.

It is, of course, true that there are varying perceptions of God. Theological and philosophical discourses are full of them. Because of the influence of these ideas, religious doctrines tend to embody these differing perspectives on God.

Through these doctrines, the ordinary follower of this or that religion has come to believe that there is something exclusive, something distinctive about his or her God.

Whatever the perception, the truth is God is one. All the prophets throughout the ages recognised and understood this eternal truth. They sought, through different paths, to lead their followers to the worship of the same God. The prophets are in no way responsible for the differing perceptions of God which have developed over time.

That God is one, and should be acknowledged as such, is also the message of the great mystics from different spiritual traditions. It is significant that mystical philosophers like Shabistari, Lao-Tzu, Samkara and Eckhart perceived the essence and meaning of God in remarkably identical ways though they gave different names, and used different symbols.

One of the most eloquent testimonies to the universality of God comes from the pen of the renowned Muslim mystic, Jalaluddin Rumi. He once wrote:

"The lamps are different, but the light is the same; it comes from beyond. If thou keep looking at the lamp, thou art lost; for thence arises the appearance of number and plurality. Fix thy gaze upon the Light, and thou art delivered from the dualism inherent in the infinite body."

Since that profound, intuitive insight which is the rare blessing of many an illustrious mystic is not readily available to the vast majority of us, we have to try to understand the truth about God through other avenues. Metaphysical speculation is not the answer. It will only lead to endless linguistic acrobatics which will dissipate our intellectual energies. This is because by relying upon the human intellect alone which is, after all, so limited, it will not be possible to comprehend the infinite Truth that is God.

For all of us, there is perhaps only one way: we have to discover the oneness of God through the experience of living. Indeed, this is what God had intended in the first instance. In all the famous scriptures revealed to humankind, God places great emphasis upon righteous living. It is the importance of righteous deeds that are stressed over and over again. It is through righteous deeds that humankind will understand God, and God's purpose

This is why instead of quarrelling over semantics - whether a certain term has an exclusive or inclusive meaning, whether it has a particularistic or universal significance - we should be more concerned about love and compassion in human relationships. These are, after all, the attributes of God.

We should be involved in the struggle to ensure that justice and freedom and equality prevail. For that is what God wants us to do. We should be

ving with each other to uphold truth and integrity. We should be urging each other to exercise restraint and moderation.

We should be promoting, with selfless zeal, the cause of unity and amity among our diverse peoples. Indeed, we should, in accordance with the spiritual ethics found in every religious tradition, strive to realise the harmony between the human being and nature, the harmony in the universe itself.

As we give meaning to these divine values in our relationship with society and our environment, so should we attempt to nurture and nourish these values in our own individual selves. It is not just a matter of being honest or compassionate; it is also a question of becoming more tolerant, more patient, more disciplined and more industrious. Each and every endeavour aimed at strengthening one's ethical values is a sacred act of worship.

If each and everyone of us demonstrated our love of God through a sincere attempt to uphold the ethical values embodied in our respective religious teachings, we would understand why God is one and the same. For if these values are eternal and universal, then every human being has access to them.

It means that anyone of us who is devoted and dedicated to these eternal, universal values is, in fact, loyal to God. And since these ethical values constitute man's ideal nature, "loyalty to God," as the respected thinker, Muhammad Iqbal, put it, "virtually amounts to man's loyalty to his own ideal nature."

The affirmation of God then is the affirmation of our own ideal nature; it follows therefore that the denial of God is the repudiation of our own ideal nature. It is the negation of all those universal, spiritual values which should guide the human being in his earthly sojourn. In other words, injustice, oppression, exploitation, dishonesty, corruption, greed, acquisitiveness, arrogance, ignorance, lust, hatred, bigotry and chauvinism lead to the denial of God.

It is this that tantamounts to atheism. The holy Quran itself says as much. It asks:

"Hast thou observed him who belieeth religion? That is he who repelleth the orphan. And urgeth not the feeding of the needy. Ah,

woe unto worshippers who are heedless of their prayer, who would be seen (at worship) yet refuse small kindnesses!"

(107:1-7).

I am sure there are similar sentiments in all the other religions.

When the affirmation of God is linked to righteous deeds and the denial of God is linked to wrongful deeds, all the quibbling about what "Allah" means in Islam and "Dhamma" means in Buddhism pale into insignificance.

It is vital that this sort of real, tangible consciousness of God becomes a vibrant, vigorous force in our lives. For it is obvious that in spite of all our ritualistic worship of God, in spite of all our incessant proclamation of God's greatness, in spite of all the consecration of God through song and symbol, through edict and institution, we remain divorced from God in the real sense of the word.

It is not the power of God that pervades contemporary society. It is not spiritual values or a spiritual worldview that informs social policy or human endeavour. Rather it is the influence of economic wealth and the impact of political power that make and mould our lives. Truly, wealth and power, not God, reign supreme.

Wealth and power have even taken on the very attributes of God! They are omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient. They sustain all life, they create, they destroy. In some places it is the market and money that occupy centre stage; in other places, it is State and the Party that dominate. Nowhere does the presence of God manifest itself as the guiding light. Nowhere is God-consciousness reflected in actual social structures.

The absence of an all-embracing, all-encompassing God-consciousness in the life of both the individual and society is one of the root causes of the malaise that afflicts contemporary civilisation.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the multitude of challenges confronting modern man from environmental degradation and nuclear proliferation to vast inequalities in wealth and political repression can only be overcome through an alternative ideology with a strong spiritual foundation.

It is this alternative that we should be trying to work out. This is the greatest task of our age - a task that challenges the wisdom and ingenuity of all those who think and care, whatever their religion. What is needed is not just a thorough diagnosis of our existing social ills. Even education and conscious-raising around alternative ideas will not be enough.

What confronts us is a momentous task that demands nothing less than a total transformation of present social structures. Only if there is such a transformation will those values and ideals embodied in God consciousness permeate the entire social order. Only then will the followers of different religions develop a common perception of God - a perception sustained by social realities.

It is towards this goal that we should strive, especially those of us who cherish God and religion. It would be a terrible pity if at a time when human-kind is faced with the possibility of its own extinction, we choose to indulge in esoteric debates about the appropriateness of certain terminologies.

This, if nothing else, must surely earn the wrath of God.