

MORAL EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF A MULTI ETHNIC SOCIETY

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The purpose of religion is to teach man to find peace within himself. To do this he must learn to act in such a way that he does not bring harm either to himself or others. If everyone behaves in this manner it will mean that individuals and society are bound in a social contract by mutual respect. Man is a superior being because he has evolved a strong moral code which governs his behaviour. The more he abides by this code because of his understanding and less because he is afraid of punishment, the more 'cultured' he becomes. When we demand freedom we must be prepared to accept that this freedom is to be exercised with self-restraint and with a sense of responsibility for the welfare of others. This is especially true in nations which are multi-religious and multi-cultural.

Ed.

Man has been most successful in this business of survival because he has developed not only his cunning but also his ability to change and adapt his viewpoint according to changes in time and locale.

While there are distinct behaviour patterns which pertain to particular groups of people, the human race as a whole has some universal values which are common to all mankind. Again these are based on the demands of survival. There is perhaps no society in the world which condones the wanton killing of another member of the group, for example. Of course the higher up the evolutionary ladder we go, the wider our perspective becomes. Thus the more "civilized" a person is, the more he is able to perceive the shared humanity of all human beings rather than the common features he shares with the members of his group alone. Ultimately, as the world community progresses upwards along the evolutionary ladder, more and more people will see other "ethnic" groups as one large brotherhood of a common species. The highest development of this will be when we are able to extend our sense of oneness to include all other living beings as well.

We are undoubtedly very far from achieving such an advanced civilization in the near future, but as long as the idea of a common human race exists so long can we hope that it will be achieved some day, at least in the distant future. In

the meantime, we have to be content with discussing how to find common moral grounds for the different ethnic communities that exist today.

There is a tendency for governments today to separate Religions and Politics. It is easy to see why this highly unsatisfactory state of affairs has evolved. Men have become wary of religion because the history of many religions is marred by tales of exploitation and oppression which are a disgrace to human dignity. In the name of preserving “morality” unscrupulous religious leaders have maimed, tortured and killed. But this need not be so. Religions evolved as a means to find some kind of order in the seemingly chaotic existence of man. Religion gave man an importance, it helped him to grapple with the baffling questions “who am I?”, “What am I doing here?”, “Am I needed?” In an effort to convince man of his superiority over animals, religion made man develop a sense of responsibility towards his fellow creatures and an accountability for his own actions. Primitive man developed religion to allay his fears about the unknown forces which he believed were responsible for his well-being or otherwise. But as man progressed, and his knowledge of the workings of the universe grew, religion helped him to understand his responsibilities as a superior being. Man was required to behave as a “moral creature” because he understood that such behaviour gave him dignity and ensured the well-being of his fellow creatures.

We are now at that stage of civilization where a significant number of human beings are concerned about not what happens to them alone, but about what happens to the human race as a whole. Aided by true religion as taught directly by the various founders, (and not the distortions wrought out by subsequent followers) man has learned that universal values such as love, compassion, charity, forgiveness, tolerance and understanding hold the key to our survival as a human race. Based on these it is conceivable that a set of moral codes for all of humanity can be devised in some Utopian future time.

Unfortunately there are far too many people on the other hand who have twisted religion, and politics to serve their own selfish ends. These people who claim to have the monopoly of the truths of salvation, of heaven, of hell, believe that only by their set of values alone will the human race be saved. Any rational look at the world around us will convince the intelligent man that man is a highly complex creature, capable of a great variety of ways of interpreting the universe. This has given rise to the incredible richness of the world’s cultures – in Art, Architecture, Poetry, Music, Dance and Religion.

There are two sets of moral codes. These are the universal laws like abstaining from taking life or taking what is not given, and man-made laws like obeying traffic rules. The universal laws are for all time and for all people and they are

intrinsic to all religions. The man-made laws (like dress codes and so on) can vary according to the group which practises it.

It would be foolhardy indeed to insist that all men must be made to conform to only one set of moral code in order to ensure salvation. We have been at it for thousands of years, and there is no chance at all that even in another hundred thousand years all men will conceivably share an identical set of moral values. We would be very dull indeed if we did.

No, what is necessary for mankind is to allow different moral codes to co-exist, to satisfy the different needs of different groups across time and space. And in place of the belief that there is only one way to skin a cat we should contribute to the concept of Unity in Diversity, of respecting the way other people do things, of learning from them if possible, of being open minded about other beliefs.

This, to my mind, is how to successfully practise moral in a multi –ethnic society.

All of this of course means developing one's sense of humility towards what one accepts as being good moral behaviour. It means that no one group should flaunt its beliefs by making unnecessary displays of its rituals and beliefs which will offend others.

In a multi-cultural society such as ours, we should refrain from doing things in public which will offend others. For example those who do not mind the mixing of opposite sexes should do this in such a way as not to offend those who have strong moral codes against this. Again the display of certain foods and meats by one group might offend the members of other groups. The loud practice of religious rituals might not be acceptable to others and so on.

So while we may be free to do what we want in terms of moral behaviour, we should practise this democratic right with sensitivity, we should make serious efforts to understand how others feel about their beliefs and moral codes. Above all we should not make nuisances of ourselves by proclaiming that we alone are right and that all others are wrong.

