

GLOBAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: DALIT PERSPECTIVE

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1. Caste Element and Religious Education

I am well aware of the long history of this great metropolis of bringing closer the various faith/religious traditions of the world. Chicago was also the venue of the first ‘World Parliament of Religions’ in 1893, which was attended by one of the illustrious sons of my country, Swami Vivekananda. On the opening day of the Parliament, in his response to the welcome address, Swamiji had said, “I have to thank you America, for the great attempt you are making to break down the barriers of this little world of ours, and hope that, in the future the Lord will help you to accomplish your purpose.”¹ This was about 120 years ago. The world today has come closer in certain ways, but unfortunately, in many others the hiatus between people has widened. A great deal of work still remains to be done, and it needs the concerted effort of all of us in that direction. I would like to sincerely thank Prof. Dwight Hopkins and his colleagues for putting in their best to keep the work going. Their effort indeed is in the true tradition of the Chicago spirit and is an inspiration to all of us. That the ‘International Association of Black Religion and Spiritualities’ (IABRS) and those representing our communities here are part of this great ‘Association’ is a living proof of this truth.

It is a privilege to be a part of this panel discussion. The theme of Global Religious Education is indeed opportune in the contemporary world, which is in such haste that the people are fast losing their bearing. However, in my presentation, I am giving a slight angle to the theme by looking at it from the ‘Dalit Perspective’. Today the ‘global context’ and the ‘local context’ have come so close to each other through the power of communication and the expanded economy that they seem to merge together. Generally, things are not different in India, but the factor of ‘caste’ in our society makes everything very different from the others. The reality of the Caste looms large – very large – in the Indian context. Caste divides the Indian society hierarchically into four fixed and unchangeable groups into which one is born. The architects of the caste system did not see it fit to include a section of people in the graded fourfold caste-structure; it is these people who called themselves the Dalits. These people face a continuous onslaught and disparaging humiliation from the caste-people in their everyday life. For 3500 years, the Dalits have lived a life of servitude in utter destitution without any hope whatsoever. No social upliftment programme or economic progress succeeded in changing the pattern of their life because of the inherent attitude of my country-people, which has been shaped primarily by their caste-ethos. When I talk of Religious Education today, my focus is on these people of my country.

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Again, I am not the first one who is making reference to the 'caste element' while talking of the Indian religious traditions. In fact, it was again Swami Vivekananda who first referred to this factor while clarifying the role of caste in relation to practicing religion in India. In his lecture on 26th September 1893 on the theme 'Buddhism: The Fulfillment of Hinduism,' he had said: "The religion of the Hindus is divided into two parts: the ceremonial and the spiritual. The spiritual portion is specially studied by the monks. In that there is no caste. A man from the highest caste and a man from the lowest may become a monk in India, and the two castes become equal."² What Swamiji implied was that it was the ceremonial aspect of Hinduism that bars even the entry of the Dalits into places of worship on the purity-pollution basis. But sadly it is not so. For example, if on one hand Buddhism allows everyone to become a monk, irrespective of his/her caste, we come across on the other hand various congregations that have come into being on the basis of caste alone. I am sure that Swamiji would have been extremely sorry to see that even in the 21st century, when everyone is trying to come closer together, in Delhi itself, which is the capital city of India, there are more than 12 Buddhist congregations comprised of various Dalit groups, and all of them are headed by only Dalit monks. Again, we can see similar trends among the Christians in my country, where congregations are established on the basis of caste factor. A national bi-monthly magazine 'Frontline' recently reported how in a Christian church caste is practiced in its extreme form; the report says, "The Dalit Christians are not allowed to bury their dead in the church cemetery. Besides, the cross-shaped church has enabled the upper castes to occupy the centre, while the sides are earmarked for Dalits."³

With the end of British rule, India became an independent country in 1947. However, this cannot be said of the 250 million strong Dalit population of India. In fact they have been under the worst type of colonial rule now for over 3500 years, which can be divided into four periods. Their colonization began with Aryans vanquishing these indigenous people approximately around 1500 BCE. This continued till 700 CE, when the Muslim rulers swept the country. After the Muslims came the British in 1700 CE. Since 1947, when India was declared an Independent nation, the Dalit population has continued to be in the state of 'Internal colonization'. And this is in spite of the fact that our Constitution is one of the most liberal and protective towards this oppressed community. Against this historical background, let us now take a look at the education of these people.

Education and religious education were synonymous during the Vedic period of Indian history, when Aryans ruled the country. It was not a field open to every section of Indian society. A traveller to India in 1030 CE gave a very precise picture of education system of these times: "The Brahmins teach the Veda to the Kshatriyas, the latter learn it, but are not allowed to teach it, not even to a Brahmin. But the Vaishyas and Sudras are not allowed to hear it, much less to pronounce and recite it. If such a thing is proved against any one of them, the Brahmins could drag him before the magistrate and he is punished by having his tongue cut off."⁴ More or less a similar situation prevailed during the Muslim period with regard to education/religious education in India. The worst came during the British period. Barriers on imparting/getting education were no doubt done away with during this period, but the British introduced an education system that

supported the caste order, enlarging the gulf between the Dalits and non-Dalits. For the rich and the dominant they opened schools offering them the discipline of English language and literature and science subjects. This they did to prepare them for administrative jobs. The British attitude to impart such education to only a section of Indians is well reflected in the words of Lord Macaulay, who had suggested creating “a class of people that are Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morale and in intellect.”⁵ As for the masses (the Dalits and the others), they opened separate schools where sub-standard education was imparted in local languages to make them carry on in life at the lower level.

The education policy perpetuated by the British reminds of two-tumbler system that prevails in most of India because of her adherence to the caste ethos. According to it two tumblers are used in restaurants and other public places for serving water/drinks – one is meant for the members belonging to the upper caste, and the other for the Dalits. However, the education policy introduced by the British continued in post- independence India as well. But based upon the spirit of the Indian Constitution, the Indian Government has tried to deal with this situation in various ways from time to time. Recently the Government has brought in the law called ‘Right to Education Act 2009,’ according to which all the schools are supposed to enroll 25% children from the ‘Economical Weaker Sections’ of the society, so that they can also get quality education. As of now this law is not fully operational in the right spirit because the majority of the good schools in the country are being run by either the Christian and other religious communities, or by the business houses. In the process of their enrollment they give a semblance of adhering to the law, but in fact they teach the poor children in separate classes and in regional languages. Even their examinations are conducted under a separate system. In effect therefore, they still remain where they were before the promulgation of the law. Now as long as such divisions will continue the idea of equal opportunity in all spheres of life will remain a distant dream. No doubt, such a situation with regard to education is prevailing in many other countries of the South, but it is different in India mainly because here quality education is not related *only* to the economic condition of the parents, but also to his/her status in the caste-hierarchy. Therefore, I would like to give a call from this platform to the members of civil society around the world (of which IABRS is a part), to take up this issue to those who are in power in different countries and tell them to relinquish this two tumbler policy from the education system everywhere, more so from India!

2. Global Religious Education and Faith Communities

Let me begin my reflection now on Global Religious Education by referring to the words of another great thinker, Prof. Hans Kung, who wrote in his introduction to the volume on ‘Global Ethic’ after the second ‘Parliament of the World Religions’ (1993) “that for the sake of peace among humankind at both a local level (in ‘multi-cultural’ and ‘multi-religious’ cities) and a global level (in global communication, the global economy, global ecology and global politics), reflection on an ethic *common* to all human beings is more than ever necessary.”⁶ As far as his observation about ‘multi-cultural and multi-religious cities’ is concerned, I want to contend that such a society may be a new experience for

Northern countries, but in the South there are many countries that have been living in that ethos now for over two millennia. India is one such country. Over that time we have not only arrived at the common denominator drawn from the “common ethic” that Prof. Hans Kung referred to, but we are also working towards appreciating the differences among ourselves. It is this *appreciation of differences* that should become a major factor when we are trying to discuss religion in the global context. Undoubtedly, emphasis on finding the ‘common factors’ in different world religions is important, but in my opinion, more important is to understand and appreciate the ‘differences’ that make them different faiths. That perhaps will show us the right direction for establishing ‘Peace’ in this conflict-torn world, because it is the differences on which the conflict situations in the world are built both at the local as well as the global level. Cherishing the common factors among ourselves brings us closer up to one level only; but understanding and appreciating the differences can take us to a level where we can be comfortable even with our opponents. It is in this that the role of ‘religious education’ becomes indispensable.

The concern of the oppressed communities of the world (like the Dalits) will by itself come into focus when this approach is adopted. This is because of the two factors: (1) More than 70% of the people of the world are followers of one faith or the other; and (2) religions are the most organized groups in the world. Therefore, when different religions shall be brought together on the basis of understanding and appreciation, together they will contribute to the development of humanity as never before. Generally speaking, all the faith communities uphold the sacredness of the entire creation. For example, in Hinduism the Vedic understanding says that the whole universe has only one source and everything goes back to the same.⁷ According to Buddha’s Dhamma, a virtue named *maitri* (loving kindness to human being) is much broader than *Karuna*. The *maitri* “is wider than love. It means fellowship not merely with human beings but all living things.”⁸ Here we find the basis of not only human solidarity, but the principle of integrity of the whole creation. The Founder of Sikh Religion, Guru Nanak Devji is still clearer on the issue of the integrity of the creation. He declared that the whole creation is the work of God, the Creator (*Karata*), who “Himself He created, and manifested His Name. Thus object, expanse of the universe He made, settled in His cushion, in joy He beheld it.”⁹ The three main Semitic originated religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – also uphold a similar doctrine of creation based on the teaching of *Torah* (the first five books of the Hebrew Scripture). These are only brief references to some of the major faith communities. Everyone of us can look for some kind of inspiration from our faith commitment, and if we can be brought in as partners to deal with issues like sustainable human development – that includes the surrounding environment – we can very effectively deal with the age-old problems of caste-class and the human divisions created by it, which have direct link with the larger issue of ‘peace and justice’.

The process of re-looking at the religious traditions is already going on; but it is very slow. For example Swami Vivekananda’s ‘Chicago Addresses’ (1893), and later his complete work comprising of Volumes I –VIII (Calcutta 1921),¹⁰ are the earliest examples of the reinterpretation of Hinduism and the caste issue. The other good example is ‘The Buddha and His Dhamma’ by B.R. Ambedkar, in which he re-interpreted Buddhism keeping in focus the issue of the Dalits.¹¹ The most recent example

in this direction is the ‘*Dalit Bible Commentary*,’ of which 10 volumes of New Testament are already published (2006-09); and five volumes of Old Testament (out of proposed 20 volumes) were released on 30th April 2011. It is important to understand that *Dalit Bible Commentary* is “not reader-response experience, but a challenge- response to the caste context of rejection, subjugation and violence.”¹² These are three possible concrete examples of the process of relooking at religious traditions, and all of these are related to the Indian context, particularly to the context of the excluded Dalit community of India. Likewise, such an approach should be promoted in our Global Religious Education, which should aim at infusing humanity and love among the followers of different faiths.

3. Closing remarks

I shall like to close this brief presentation by laying the stress on the need of a global solidarity of the oppressed and the poor, which very much includes the Dalits of my country. A beginning in this direction is already being made by IABRS. This process should also include building alliances, keeping up pressure for achieving alternative approaches for imparting quality education (including religious) to everyone, and developing directions towards collectively identifying the problems of our communities, as well as working out the transformational solutions of the same. This alternative process of education will enable the world’s oppressed communities to build another (alternative) world where all will live with full human dignity, because ultimately that is the purpose of the Global Religious Education.

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