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"Religion", "Media" and the question of "Authority"

The basic questions

Religion is among the hottest issues of our time. The very fact that a full panel discussion has been allocated to the issue of religion at this "Asia Media Summit 2005" speaks of the sensitivity of the subject in the contemporary world.

It is obvious that religion has agitated the world politics, and for this, it has become the focal point of media. Yet in order to understand the problem in a more comprehensive manner, and to view it with a clearer vision, it helps to deliberate on a few basic questions:

- Why is "Religion" an issue "Now"?
- Does the problem emanate from the nature of "Religion" (or that of a specific religion), or is there something wrong with "Now"?
- Who is having the problem, and Why?

We shall make effort to address the above questions briefly in this short paper.

Shift from Truth to Facts



Political powers either take religion as a form of threat that challenges their authority, while other take side with it in order to materialize aims that aren't necessarily religious. And the audience, who is, in most cases, not quite aware of the games played behind the screen, is pushed in different directions by the "media" fleetingly, hoping to get hold of the "truth" in the rollercoaster ride of "information"; as time goes by he finds the ride more and more interesting, develops a taste for it; an attraction that eventually turns to addiction: the ride that media provides is entertaining, colorful, abundant and constant. Gradually the audience becomes 'enlightened'; he is now 'liberated' from the burden of search for "Truth" and understands that the enjoyment lies in spending time with the news itself, and not worrying so much about the outcome, for if the ride ends and the global soap opera is deprived of its exciting scenes life becomes too flat to bear. 'Truth' is no longer an issue; it is not entertaining enough, nor it makes money. The 'news' we encounter comprise 'fragmented facts', and the way these fragments are composed, in many cases, follow the pattern suggested by the super-powers to be played in the game of global politics. But the irony remains that neither the politicians, nor the audience are totally at ease with the issue of religion, specially that aspect of it which makes 'hot news' more often than anything else.

Our notion of peace too has undergone essential transformation in the age of modernization. 'Peace' from a religious view, is directly linked with spirituality. This inner tranquility is eventually supposed to find manifestation in society and is hoped to spread to the world. So the whole concept of peace



has a spiritual foundation in a religious context; and therefore social peace can happen only after the inner peace is accomplished. Our modern world perceives the notions of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ in a new manner that is diverse from that of tradition; we talk about ‘inner peace’ in a psychological context; we study human behavior and introduce ‘meditation techniques’ to calm us down. Every minute a ‘new’ discovery is ‘reported’, either in the domain of exact sciences or in the realm of humanities and social studies

The ‘information’ is inflating; but what about ‘knowledge and wisdom’; have we become wiser? The answer to this essential question is unfortunately negative for the ‘trust’ is lost. Lack of trust leads to suspicion, suspicion generates anger, anger causes enmity and enmity may result in violence, and violence is what we see in news on a daily basis. Our world lacks that ‘inner peace’, and this is also reflected in its outer reality. The fact is that the interest in the ‘Age of Information’ is shifted from inner presence to the outer present, from the spiritual essence of the very Man to the accidents of his outer ego; wisdom weakens when ego rules. Reality is fragmented into minute particles that we call ‘data’. Selected samples of these fragments are communicates to the people through media. In this selection, however, the media cannot act independent and fair.

On the one hand there exists ‘the political factor’: The political superpowers who also own the major news broadcasting empires communicate their views more prominently than any other, to persuade the residents of the globe that



their way is the ultimate way and their solution is the only one; the mentality is reflected in a well-known statement by the US president in his crusade to bring about the New World Order: “Either you are with us or against us”. It is but natural that the media as a whole unit, despite the hard work of many honest individuals who have risked their lives in many instances to provide us with the naked truth, cannot promote a reality that would contradict the interest of those who own them.

On the other hand is the “entertaining factor”; the media has to amuse and entertain people constantly through finding and providing “Interesting news” that sells and hence justifies their presence. For this, news channels must be able to compete with television serials and soap operas, and they have been successful to do so: the world news is imbedded with countless fragments of colorful information that is presented in a much more artistic manner than ever, and is certainly more convincing, as is the case with our feature films. Entertainment comes first; a sex scandal connected to a pop singer, for example, or breast cancer of a porno star has undoubtedly more entertaining quality than a scientific discovery based on decades of hardship and research. The news media thrives on conflicts, for as the dictum says, “If it bleeds it leads”.

Religion and the New World Order



The notion of Religion, in its broader sense, is as old as the history of mankind; religious belief has been an inseparable part of man's nature at least until the emergence of the "Modern era". Religion was the very first 'media' that provided man with information, knowledge and wisdom; it was through religion that man discovered himself and understood his relation with the worlds within and without – the pre-life (the world that he came from), the life (world that he experiences with his mind and physical senses), and the after-life. The world of religion is infinite; man's true identity is not therefore confined in a time-bound world of senses and of his power of 'mind'; instead he is regarded as an immortal entity whose 'self' transcends the boundaries of time and space. Man's duty towards other beings – physical as well as metaphysical, human, animal, and the natural environment in general – is governed by an 'Authority' that is believed to be transcendental. 'The World Order', as perceived in the worldview of religious man, is therefore a divine system in which faith in God and the hereafter stand fundamental.

But the world order that he faces today is different and new; it's called the New World Order (NWO). To many people, especially the Muslims, the New World Order is rather a 'New Western Order' prescribed for the world. Furthermore, to them, the way this "Order" is being implemented, does not merely imply a new 'arrangement' or 'system', but it rather involves 'force, command and demand'. "The philosophy of the NWO in concise words can be explained in the Western expression, "White man's burden" which in turn can be explained in another western claim, 'a mission of civilizing people'". Globalization too,



with ‘free trade’ as its focal point, is viewed as a new form of Western colonialism, for, those who benefit the most from it are the Western powers who already have their control over a major part of the world economy, and with materialization of Globalization the path will be smoothed for the spread of Western Capitalism to take control over areas that have so far been able to survive with a different system of economy and of thought. On the other hand, no true religious system can accept an authority that establishes “money and trade” as the axis-mundi of the universe; a system in which Money is deified but God and Religion are reduced to aspects of “cultural diversity” does not please a man of faith.

Religion and ‘Cultural Diversity’

‘Cultural diversity’ too, like Globalization, is a popular subject of the day; everyone agrees that the diversity of cultures must be preserved. But why, all of a sudden, has it become crucial to keep the diversity alive?

- Is ‘cultural diversity’ now in the list of endangered species?
- What factors have led such beautiful phenomenon to the verge of extinction?

Thinking about the above questions could be enlightening and may lead to very interesting results. First of all, it is a sad fact that the beautiful diversity that has taken form on the face of earth through a very slow and natural process in the course of thousands of years is being threatened. The invaluable treasure known to us as Cultural Diversity is the embodiment of wisdom and beauty of the traditions that were responsible for their creation. Through the harmonious



blend of beauty and wisdom they gave birth to the highest forms of art, architecture, music, literature and drama. ‘Wisdom’ for the seers of those traditions was the ‘inner beauty’, while ‘beauty’ to them meant the ‘embodiment of wisdom’ in the realm of senses. The backbone of much of such diversities was in fact from religion. In the words of Herbert Read: “*The relation between art and religion is one of the most difficult questions that we have to face. We look back into the past and see art and religion emerging hand in hand from the dim recesses of pre-history. For many centuries they seem to remain indissolubly linked; and then, in Europe, about five hundred years ago, the first signs of breach appear. It widens, and in the High Renaissance we have an art that is ... aiming to express nothing beyond the artist’s own personality. The history of Western art after Renaissance is checkered and discordant... and finally we begin to think that there can be no great art, or great periods of art, without an intimate link between art and religion.*”¹

It is sad that Cultural Diversity, in the contemporary political vocabulary, refers mostly to the surface layer of cultures: things such as rituals, costumes, food, and the like are the main focus of attention; it hardly involves a thorough understanding of the philosophical and religious principles behind such diverse appearances. Preservation of cultural diversity is therefore looked upon more like preservation of outdated antiquities in a museum collection: be it an antique robe or an icon, a gold coin or a sacred talisman, they need to be preserved and kept intact, preferably “out of context”; the robe is not to be worn, the icon not

¹ Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art*, 1972, London, p.82



to be worshiped, the coin shall not be spent and the talisman is deprived of its supernatural powers. In other words it is not the ‘spirit’ that is meant to be preserved, only the form. When the soul is weakened the very existence is endangered, and it does not matter how carefully we treat the body; when the soil is not cared for, and the environment does not suit the growing, cosmetic preservations cannot help much. Modernism and Industrialization, along with the profit-oriented concept of Globalization, have created from man a greedy monster that is never fulfilled: Modernization was the first real threat to traditional way of life; the spread of industrialization in the traditional societies – that took place systematically with the intention of more profit for the business owners – destroyed many small local factories and imposed a new style of life that belittled the local way of living that was based on traditional-religious values. Globalization, as is being pursued by the economical/political powers, is by itself a great threat to the very principle of diversity. The campaign gained momentum through the influence of mass media. At the beginning the whole process looked glamorous and very “progressive” as it implied a process of ‘civilizing the uncivilized’ and ‘modernizing the backward’. But now we come to realize the destructive effect of modernization and industrialization over the very traditions which provided man with the precious diversity; something that he took for granted for a very long period.

The game gets more confusing when it comes to dealing with the problem of religion. Faith is a different domain altogether. We often use the expression, “Seeing is Believing”; this cliché refers to the domain of matter and exact



sciences and implies that “Only physical or concrete evidence is convincing”; that observation comes first and is then followed by the approval of the observer with regard to the reality of the observed. In the realm of religion, however, faith, that is believing, precedes seeing; that is to say there are certain realities that transcend the temporal senses, that only the eyes of a believer can perceive; those who do not believe, according to the Qur’an, have eyes that do not see, have ears that do not hear for “God has set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing, and on their eyes is a veil...” (Qur’an 2: 7, 16:108). Seeing, hearing and believing – the very system by which media operates – in a religious world view, operate according to different values and principles that may be understood only by the language of faith; this is where a dialogue with religion can initiate. We must accept that religion addresses the issue of reality in a different level: ‘information’ would be considered harmful unless it leads to ‘Knowledge’, and knowledge would do no good unless it is guided by rays of Wisdom and is put into action; It seems that wisdom has lost its credibility in the age of information, for “we have more degrees but less sense, more knowledge, but less judgment, more experts, yet more problems, more medicine, but less wellness”. Wisdom lies only in the domain of faith, for God is its sole source. So, one has to understand the nature of faith in order to be able to deal with it. Our fellow journalists and media people may find my approach idealistic, and may feel that in this age of information and communication, the media does not have the luxury of time, to go beyond the crust of unveiled facts and to dive deep into the domain of what I call ‘the concealed reality of faith’. I do not wish to sound idealistic. In fact I wish for



all of us to be very realistic, and accept the fact that the issue of religion could not be resolved through discussing its effects within some selected socio-political situations and spheres, and through allocating media footage on the base of its ‘entertaining values’; rather by addressing the cause essence; I feel that when we address religious issues on the base of stereotypes, and neglect the metaphysical aspect of ‘faith’, that is where we become idealistic.

