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**THE CONTEMPORARY NEED FOR A WAY OF TEACHING RELIGION
THAT MAKES HUMAN BEINGS MORE MATURE
AND HUMANITY MORE UNITED.**

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I consider it a great privilege to have the opportunity to participate at this Forum held in the great city of Kolkata and organized by the Australian Multi-cultural Foundation. The aim of the Forum is clear: to find a solution to one of the greatest problems of modern times, namely, conflict between religions. With that aim in view all the speakers and discussants will be presenting at this forum their views and suggestions.

The suggestion I want to offer is based on my conviction that, if religions are in conflict with one another today, the blame should be borne by nobody else but by those of us who are professionally religious educators. All of us religious educators, whether Hindu, Buddhist, Christian or Muslim, have been very un-introspective in our way of teaching religion. We have followed a system (and that system is called "theology" in the West), which has as its sole purpose the protection of the handed-down tradition of the institution we belong to.

If that is the main task of religious education, it is only to be expected that believers will constantly engage in conflicts to protect their institution. But there is more to religion and religious education than the protection of institutional traditions. It is the rectification of our method of teaching religion that I want here to propose as the right solution to the problem of inter-religious conflict. As indicated in the title to my paper too, what the contemporary world needs most today is a more enlightened way of teaching religion, namely one that could make human beings more mature and humanity more united.

My conviction regarding the right solution is an outcome of my actual involvement during a long period in my life with different religions. Very briefly, that involvement of mine is this. By a strange combination of life's circumstances –too cumbersome and even unnecessary to bring out in detail – I have been a teacher of not just one religion, but of two. I have taught Buddhism at a Christian seminary to candidates to the priesthood for nearly 20 years, and Christianity for an equally long period in a predominantly Buddhist Department of a state university. Quite naturally to

dialogue is imaginatively presented as having taken place between a teacher and a pupil in a French school.

Catherine, what is your nationality?

My nationality is French.

What is your religion?

My religion is Christianity.

Catherine, what would your nationality have been if you had been born in Tibet?

If I had been born in Tibet, my nationality would have been Tibetan.

What would your religion have been if you had been born in Tibet?

If I had been born in Tibet, very likely my religion would have been Buddhism.

Catherine, what would your nationality have been if you had been born in Saudi Arabia?

If I had been born in Saudi Arabia, my nationality would have been Saudi Arabian.

What would your religion have been if you had been born in Saudi Arabia?

If I had been born in Saudi Arabia, my religion very likely would have been Islam.

Catherine, what would your nationality have been if you had been born in India?

If I had been born in India, my nationality would have been Indian.

What would your religion have been if you had been born in India?

If I had been born in India, very likely my religion would have been Hinduism.

If so Catherine, isn't it by chance that you and I are Christian and French? Isn't it in the same way that all people acquire their nationality and religion? If things are so, does it not imply that we who as French people are today upholding the supremacy of Christianity would have been upholding the supremacy of quite another religion had we been born elsewhere? Does that not mean that we should re-examine our customary attitude to nationality and religion, whether of our own or of others?

This dialogue digs out a hard truth that many of us would prefer left un-earthed.

The fact is that the religion we take pride in adhering to, and usually hail as the best religion in the world, is something that each of us have got as accidentally as the color of our skin. I am Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim, simply because my parents were so. My religion is not something that I have freely and conscientiously chosen. Before seeking membership in it, I did not submit it to any examination. I did not weigh the pros and cons of its values. My religion was something that was thrust on me.

Siddharta Gautama, who eventually became the Buddha started at the age of 29 to search for the religion that he wanted for himself. When he did not find it in the schools of asceticism and meditation that he frequented, he looked for it on his own. It was at the age of 35 that he found it. He referred to that moment of discovery as 'awakening' or 'enlightenment'. Ever after, he preached that religion of 'mind-awakening' (Buddhism) to those around him.

Jesus of Nazareth did not practice or preach what could be called the 'born-to' type of religion. He referred to his form of religion as the one to which a person is 'reborn'. When Nicodemus, a religious leader of the Jewish community, came to find out from him the path to the Kingdom of God, Jesus wanted him to be 'reborn'. Taking the word literally, Nicodemus is said to have queried "But, how is it possible for a man to be re-born when he is old? Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be re-born?" The answer of Jesus though of a poetic nature, throws light on what we are to understand by religion of the 're-born to' form. He said, "Flesh can give birth only to flesh. It is Spirit that gives birth to spirit" (Jn 3:1-8).

Mohammed did not adhere to the religion that he was born to. It was when he was fully grown up that he discovered what true religion was and had to be. He was 40 years when he was awakened to what life is and how it is to be rightly lived. That moment of awakening is given as the moment in which he received a revelation of God through the medium of the angel Gabriel. For him the essence of religion was total submission to God, the ultimate source of power, goodness and righteousness.

We are here in India the land of the Hindu Rishis as also of Jain, Parsi and Sikh sages, and I don't have to add that their view of religion is no different.

It is rather unfortunate that we teachers of religion have never taken seriously into account the distinction between the "born-to" and the "awakened to" versions of religion. Had we done so, the problem of inter-religious conflicts would already have got solved to a great extent.

I am not implying thereby that we should leave out one version and keep the other. To do that would be incorrect. Both versions are vital for human beings. The two answer two concrete needs and dimensions of human beings, one social, the other spiritual. Further the two forms have existed from the beginning of time and they are sure to last till the end of time. The question here therefore is not what to accept and what to reject, but what priorities to observe while safeguarding both.

Let us now take these "born-to" and "awakened-to" forms of religion one by one and see what their structure is and how they are taught.

nationality, English or French by mother-tongue, and Muslim or Buddhist by religion. Together the different elements of culture give the clan, security, stability and most of all, an identity, which distinguishes it from other clans.

Because of its primary function, religion of the born-to form can be called religion of the clan protective form" or in short "clan-religion". Any religion and even those called "Major Religions", because they are spread out among people of different cultures, have a clan dimension to them. The clearest indication to that is the fact that today no Major Religion is of one uniform shape. There is today not one Hinduism but many Hinduisms; not one Buddhism, but many Buddhisms; not one Christianity, but many Christianities; not one Islam, but many Islams.

If we take just Buddhism, the Buddhism of Sri Lanka is different from that of Tibet, and the Buddhism of Tibet from that of Japan. In Christianity, Churches referred to as Roman Catholic, Presbyterian or Greek Orthodox are all different from one another. With regard to denominational division, Christianity could be said to hold the record. According to the "World Christian Encyclopaedia"¹, edited by David B. Barrett and published in 1982, there are today as many as 20.780 Independent Christian denominations. If there are so many denominations then the conclusion has to be that there are as many theologies, for theology is what gives identity to an institution.

Religion as spirituality

But of course we know now that religion is conceivable not exclusively in the clan or institutional form but also in a spiritual form or as a form of spirituality. Any individual religion can be conceived in both those ways. There is a clan Hinduism as also a spiritual Hinduism; a clan Christianity as also a spiritual Christianity; so is it with all other religions.

Now we have to examine what the method is that a teacher has to follow when teaching any religion in its spirituality dimension. Unfortunately since spirituality is less tangible and less accessible to the senses, the spirituality method of teaching religion is more difficult to describe than the institutional one. The only way to grasp it is to look at it in comparison and contrast with the institutional method, which is that of theology.

The first difference that a teacher will notice between the two is in the nature of the formation that each system imparts. Because of the need to protect the handed down tradition of beliefs and practices proper to the institution, theology does not give people the freedom to think and act on their own. In any religion members have to profess their faith in the teachings exactly as formulated by the institutional authority. Quite understandably, in any religion those considered good and orthodox believers are

A second characteristic of theology is that it has to uphold that the institution it represents is the greatest and the truest in the world; and that all other institutions, if not totally false, are at least inferior to theirs. All institutions, whether Hindu, Buddhist, Christian or Muslim, make that claim. There is no institution, for example, that does not affirm that its founder and books are unique and unsurpassable. Such a claim not only makes close association between religions impossible; it even paves the way to open inter-religious conflicts. But of course any thinking person knows that the claim of individuals that their religion is the greatest is a hidden way of claiming that their clan is the greatest.

Religion of the spirituality form has nothing to gain by proclaiming the glory of the institution. Its stand is that true greatness is not in belonging to an institution but in right living. With such a stand, religion of the spirituality form has no reason to clash with other religions. Religions can collaborate with each other, because they all have a common mission. All religions want to bring healing to spiritually sick human beings.

Clan psyche

There are thus certain important differences between the theology method and the spirituality method. In the background of such differences, and very particularly because of the power that the theology method has always wielded, can we say that this spirituality method will get ready acceptance and that it will be widely adopted? Personally I don't think so; and I say that not because of any inaptitude or weakness I see in the method, but because, however absurd it may sound, there is in each one of us an inner force, which prevents us from being objective and impartial in our attitude to religion, whether our own, or those of others. The upbringing we have received as believers is such that we cannot but uphold that the religion we were born to, is the only one that is right, or at least that it is the one which will ultimately triumph.

However difficult it be to understand the mysterious force behind this unfounded conviction of almost all religious believers, it is a matter that should not be left unmentioned in a Forum such as this dedicated to the cause of finding a solution to the problem of inter-religious conflict. There is one explanation to this mysterious force that I like to submit for consideration here. But of course I must confess that it is not an idea of my own, but one I gathered from the talk of a professional psychologist at a university conference on Religious Sociology. Personally I found his explanation very helpful in understanding why it is not easy to solve inter-religious conflicts or to bring about a reform in the teaching of religion.

He said the human mind consisted of two parts: one part called the "clan psyche"

that we teachers of religion too should give consideration to, for it is not impossible that we ourselves have not fully got out of the clutches of the clan psyche. If it is so, it is our duty to take steps to get our personal mind liberated from the control of the clan psyche. This is because we will not be able to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the cause of promoting true spirituality if in the secret bottom of our subconscious we continue to assume that by the religion we were born to, we are above others.

Now that we have seen, even though in only a limited way, the characteristics of the spirituality method and the problems it is likely to face in its implementation, let us see what the procedure is that a teacher will have to follow when explaining religious doctrines according to the spirituality method. To explain a doctrine in view of bringing out human values is however not easy.

Sample Presentation of Buddhism

If I am to provide even in a general way a clue as to how this has to be done, there is nothing better I can do than to point to an attempt made by a scholar of Buddhism to present the spiritual dimension of the beliefs that are basic to Buddhism. He is the Venerable Bhikkhu Buddhadasa of Thailand, author of the booklet titled "Two kinds of language". In this booklet he shows that the religious beliefs of Buddhism are expressed in two languages one of which he calls "Dharma language" and the other "everyday language". The first is what we could consider as spiritual language and the other that of institutional theology. Using these two languages he has given in his booklet the meaning of all the basic tenets of Buddhism. To show in brief what he has done let me quote his explanation of just two basic doctrines of Buddhism, that on Nirvāna or ultimate liberation and that on Samsāra or rebirth after death.

“There are two languages in religion, Dhamma language, and everyday language. Everyday language is based on physical things and on experiences accessible to the ordinary man. By contrast, Dhamma language has to do with the mental world, with the intangible non-physical world. Consequently, it is only people who have seen Dhamma, the truth, that can speak the Dhamma language, the language of the mental world lying beyond the physical.

We shall now consider some examples of what I mean. Let us take the word "Nirvāna" (Nibbāna). In the everyday language of the ordinary man, Nirvāna is a place or city. This is because preachers often speak of "Nirvāna, the city of immortality" or "This wonder-city of Nirvāna". People hearing this ... take it as a place abounding in all sorts of good things, a place where every good wish is fulfilled. In Dhamma language, Nirvāna refers to the complete extinction of

right here and now. One may be born as a beast many times over in a single day. So, in Dhamma language, birth as a beast means stupidity”.²

There is no need to say how valuable such an exposition can be. It is appealing to anybody because it is in keeping with common sense. There is nothing of blind faith in it. The explanation provides a salutary vision to anybody grappling with the problems of life and death. What is more the explanation is of benefit not only to Buddhists but to non-Buddhists as well. It brings non-Buddhists closer to Buddhism.

Sample presentation of Christianity

Bhikkhu Buddhadasa was a great inspiration to me in my teaching of Christianity to University students. What I strove to bring in my classes to them was the life-message of the doctrines of Christianity. To give a rough idea of how I did that, let me show the way I presented the Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus. The divinity of Jesus, as everyone knows, is a doctrine that has often been challenged by non-Christians and been a subject of controversy among Christians themselves. Of the numerous tenets that constitute the belief in the divinity of Jesus, two basic ones are his virgin birth and his resurrection. Let us take the belief in the virgin birth first. Here I must say that what I taught at the university I eventually brought out in a book titled "Christian Path to Mental Maturity" It is from that I am quoting here.

If the virgin-birth of Jesus is to be understood in the way intended by the Gospels, then it is implied that virgin-birth is not a prerogative exclusive to Jesus, but one which he shares in common with all those who arrive at the stature of life at which they can be called "Children of God". That fact is unambiguously affirmed by the author of the Fourth Gospel when he described the appearance of Jesus on earth:

"He (i.e. Jesus) entered his own realm (i.e. the Jewish community) and his own would not receive him. But to all who did receive him, to those who have yielded him their allegiance, he gave the right to become Children of God, not born of any human stock, or by the fleshly desire of a human father, but the offspring of God himself" (Jn 1:10-13).

It is a little unfortunate that those who insist that Jesus is the only one to be born of a virgin do not pay much attention to biblical texts such as this. From this text it is clear that all those who give allegiance to Jesus and his teaching on life and its fullness are themselves "not born of human stock or by the fleshly desire of a human father". They, too, are an "off-spring of God himself". If so, "virgin-birth" is a privilege that all true followers of Jesus' path to spirituality can claim for themselves.

According to that pictorial language of the Creed, Jesus rose from the dead physically on the third day after his death and burial. But when taken in its spiritual dimension, to say that Jesus rose from the dead is to say that Jesus is alive today. Jesus is alive today because he was always alive. His was a life of the Spirit. Such a life has more to it than just corporeal existence, and is unassailable by physical death. We must not forget that, according to the Gospel of John, it was when Jesus was still living that he told Martha and Mary, "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11:25). If so, he was a resurrected being even before his death.

What is more, if Christians are to profess their faith in the resurrection of Jesus in the correct way, and in the way that Jesus wanted it done, they must be ready to accept that the resurrected life is a level of life that they too are capable of experiencing already in this life. For in the thought of Jesus, the resurrected life is not a prerogative exclusive to him but one that all human beings who accept his teaching can enjoy here and now. This is clear from what he said:

"In very truth I tell you: Anyone who gives heed to what I say and puts his trust in him who sent me has hold of eternal life, and does not come for judgement, but has already passed from death to life. In truth, in very truth I tell you, a time is coming, indeed it is already here, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear shall come to life" (Jn 5:24-25).

If that is so, resurrection is not a life after death to be awaited, but an adult level of life to be pursued now. To be resurrected is to have "already passed from death to life". The "time" for rising from the dead is "already here".³

That is how I presented the Christian doctrine on the divinity of Jesus, as also other teachings of Christianity. I wanted to present them not as beliefs for profession of faith within the institution, but as values and insights that gave anybody a vision to live by. What surprised me was that these explanations seemed equally appealing to Christians. Not even three years after publication my book was put on a number of websites in Europe and also translated into Dutch and French

Let me conclude. All that I have done in this paper is to show the two different senses in which the word "religion" can be taken and to point to the way in which religion of the spirituality form can be taught. The explanation of Ven. Buddhadasa on some basic tenets of Buddhism, and the explanation I gave to university students on the Christian doctrines pertaining to the divinity of Jesus should show how Buddhism and Christianity would look like when presented as forms of spirituality.

The spirituality method relates religion to life. For that reason, the teachings of the religion become meaningful to believers. Outsiders too find it useful. People today