VIEWPOINTS

What Is Spirituality?

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[Transcribed by Karim D. Crow]

We concentrate briefly on three points. First: what is Spirituality? Second: the challenges one faces in bringing spirituality to the fore in our contemporary world. Thirdly: what are some possible solutions in bringing our spirituality to the fore?

I. Now, What is spirituality? I have been attempting to address this issue for a very long time. For me the essence of spirituality is the relationship between the human being and the divine – that is the starting point. Out of that relationship emerges a certain notion of the transcendent and the sacred. You cannot talk of spirituality and ignore the transcendent and the sacred – this is fundamental. When you look at the way in which Communism has talked about spirituality, for example at writings by the early and middle stage Marxists, they talked about spirituality devoid of any reference to the transcendent and sacred. For me that is not spirituality, for the transcendent and the sacred are vital in understanding spirituality.

This also means at the core of spirituality there is a certain consciousness of the transcendent and the sacred, and the relation of the human being to the sacred: that we are here as Trustees, Stewards, or ‘vicegerents of God’ – that’s very important in defining spirituality. We are here for a purpose, this transient existence of ours is a preparation for something else – one has to keep this at the core in order to understand what spirituality is. From that point of view spirituality is linked to the whole purpose of existence, so there will have to be values and ethics. How should you live? How do you give meaning to the purpose of existence if you don’t have a moral compass? Often I have linked spirituality with morality, so we speak of a “Spiritual–Moral vision” where the two are inseparable. By ‘moral values’ we mean things we all understand: being kind, sincere, compassionate, loving, just – those are marks of one’s morality in the real sense of the term. Along with all the principles which emanate from that, including the way you treat your parents, children, neighbours; and at this point in time, how we treat Nature. These are all vital parts of our spiritual–moral vision: our relationship with nature, how we use material resources, and caring for the well-being of future generations.

I am not suggesting that in all the different religions these elements are all expressed in the same way—they are not. Religions emerged in different circumstances, but there are parallels, which does not mean they are similar in every sense. Yet there are parallels which we should concentrate upon, while also being very much aware of the differences. Differences are also important in shaping our outlook. Because we know that there are differences, we become aware that this diversity is also a way of testing our spirituality. We recognise and celebrate this diversity, and this is important.

II. This brings me to the challenges confronting us each day in trying to emphasise the spiritual–moral dimension of our existence. One of the challenges comes from religion itself – we have to recognise this as one of the great paradoxes. The ‘Spiritual–Moral’ vision cannot exist outside the religious experience. When you look at even those who have sought to separate the two, there invariably is some reference to some religious experience or tradition. On the other hand, that tradition can also become an encumbrance and hindrance, when we become obsessed with the ‘boundaries’ established by different religions, which boundaries are part of the evolution of the particular religion. Thus religion is both a source of inspiration for our Spiritual–Moral vision, yet may also act as a hindrance when we give so much emphasis to these boundaries which often are not part of what is essential to a religion – not part of its Spiritual–Moral core. This is something to be kept in mind.

Our other great challenge is the Post-Enlightenment world, and the worldviews and notions of living that have emerged from it. This Post-Enlightenment civilisation has great strengths without any doubt at all; but it also has monumental weaknesses. One of its weaknesses is its denial of the Transcendent, the Sacred. It seeks to construct life based on this denial of the sacred and transcendent: that this material existence is all that matters. Liberal and socialist ideas may emerge from that worldview, but basically it is a worldview which is truncated. This is one of the greatest problems confronting us, since it has now become global. It is no longer a worldview associated with a particular geographic corner of the earth, nor a worldview associated with Western civilisation, but has become truly global. The sensate, individualistic, materialistic consumerist dimension of that civilisation is completely globalised.

Today among the greatest devotees of consumerism are actually people outside the Western world. If you look at the supermarkets, the malls and the suburban lifestyle – it’s not just part of that particular civilisation or history. We have all become very clever in this, for we know that we can be both devotees of the Mall and of the Mosque at the same time – so it is not a problem. People are living that way, and are quite happy living that way – and this is a major challenge to our striving to be spiritual, yet not of this world.

When people say they want this world *and* the Other world, what they are actually saying is “I want to have both if I can”. What they don’t realise is that the Spiritual–Moral conception of Life is totally different—*this world is a preparation*—you have

to live according to certain values, yet those values do not mean that you negate this existence. In fact you should not negate our bodily existence, for this is where the trial is taking place, this is how you are being tested! So you have to live life to the fullest. But this does not mean a sensate materialist life ‘*to the fullest*’; rather it means living your life according to those Spiritual–Moral values and principles, which is our major challenge, the one linked to religion.

III. This brings us to the last part of my remarks. It is important for all of us, since we belong to particular faith communities, to give more emphasis to that spiritual–moral dimension through our own lives – not just in words but more through deeds. To be more loving, more kind and compassionate, beyond merely performing rituals in a mechanical manner. Let me quote a well-known Mufti of the Muslim world, the Grand Mufti of Syria Dr. Badruddin Hassoun. Recently at a multi-faith gathering he said: “*Religious leaders all over the world should tell their followers openly that loving a person is more important than praying.*” This is really revolutionary: loving is more important than praying, being kind is more important than ritual prayer, that loving compassion counts much more than ritual observance.

This is the same Mufti who once said that even if every brick of the Ka‘bah was destroyed, that destruction is not as painful as the death of a single child. The Mufti mentioned this as a *Hadith* (tradition narrated from the Prophet) before an all-Muslim gathering, and many there did not believe him. Now *that* is the spirit which should emanate from within all our faith communities. It is extremely important for us to understand faith in that way: for love, compassion and kindness are more important than mere religious performance, than a mechanical ritual, than shallow outward conformity. The moment we understand that, then we would be giving more importance to the spiritual–moral dimension of our existence. I find that in societies which are very conscious of identity in the narrow sense – ethnic identity and communal identity – the Spiritual–Moral dimension of faith begins to recede. What is given greater emphasis are those aspects of religion which reinforce people’s narrow exclusivist identity. This is happening in our country, and it is a very big challenge!

What we should do is to ‘turn things upside-down’, so to speak, within our respective faith communities. This means giving greater weight to compassion and love and justice in relation to the transformation of society: in other words, overcoming poverty, closing the gap between rich and poor, curbing corruption, enhancing accountability. All these would be Spiritual–Moral tasks which give greater meaning to what we are and what our purpose is on earth. This link between the spiritual and the moral, on the one hand, and concrete manifestations of justice and compassion, on the other, should be imprinted in the soul of our people. This also means that one does not separate the spiritual from the secular – for what we are doing is endowing a spiritual–moral meaning to activities that are seen as secular.

Let me paraphrase the great philosopher from the Indian subcontinent Iqbal: ‘There

is no dichotomy between the spiritual and the secular; everything on the secular plane that has a spiritual motive and an ethical goal *is* spiritual.’ In truth, making a dichotomy between the two is alien to all our great philosophical traditions. This dichotomy is basically the product of the European Enlightenment. Not only in Islam does this dichotomy not exist – look at Hinduism. The greatest mathematicians in the early period of Hindu history were actually great spiritual figures – there was no dichotomy. This dichotomy between science and religion encountered by the West which has been their burden for centuries, was never part of other great civilisations such as the Chinese, Taoist, and Buddhist. We should bear this in mind.

I end by affirming that Inter-Faith dialogues are important, and we should encourage them and actively pursue them. Yet we must distinguish such dialogue from the particular endeavour we are now talking about: We seek to enliven the Spiritual–Moral dimension of our Faith and privilege that dimension by highlighting it over other aspects of faith. We seek to link it with individual and social transformation. Naturally in this process we shall be engaging with people of differing backgrounds and of various faiths. Yet what we are saying is that this particular endeavour, its inspiration and starting point, is not the existence of diverse faiths which prompts us into dialogue.

What we are saying is this: Let us begin with the Human Being – this is the big difference! The Human Being not just as a material creature of needs and wants, but the Human as a Spiritual–Moral creation with a relationship to the Divine. That is our starting point! It is not the religions and cultures that exist which form the starting point: our starting point is the Human Being. That becomes our foundation for transformation. We engage with the world around us – we transform that physical and psychic world, we make it spiritual and ethical – and this is part of our discovery, or re-discovery, of the essence of our faith. This is the greatest challenge confronting us.

Notes

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