
UNIT 16 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND SECULARISM¹⁸

Structure

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16.0 OBJECTIVES

Until the middle of the last century, the philosophy of religion, as practiced in the West, presumed the uniqueness of Christianity, so that philosophical reflection on religion was centered around the Christian religion and has concentrated primarily on the Christian (or the Judeo-Christian) concept of God. However, during the last century philosophers of religion have increasingly felt obliged to take note of the fact that there are many other great world faiths and that monotheism is only one of the major types of religion, so that it is now common for philosophers of religion to include in their reflection the problems surrounding the plurality of faith traditions. The main objective of this Unit is to draw the attention of the students to existence of many religions and introduce them to the questions it raises for philosophers of religion. It begins by defining religious pluralism, contrasting it with plurality

¹⁸ Augustine Perumalil, Satya Nillayam, Mukhathala. The section on 'Secularism' is contributed by Dr. Ashutosh Vyas, Consultant (Philosophy), SOITS, IGNOU.

of religion, and looks into the conditions that promote or hinder religious pluralism. Then the enquiry proceeds to examine the ways philosophers have responded to the questions—both philosophical and practical—connected with religious pluralism.

Thus by the end of this Unit you should be able:

- to have a basic understanding of religious pluralism and the problems it raises;
- to tolerate and even appreciate plurality;
- to understand the conditions that promote or hinder religious pluralism;
- to evaluate the various solutions proposed by philosophers in the past;
- to suggest new solutions to the problems raised by the awareness of the plurality or religion.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

Some scholars make a distinction between religious plurality and religious pluralism and define the former as the fact of religious diversity and the latter as a simple acknowledgement and acceptance of that fact. This definition, though valid, does not exhaust the meaning of the expression “religious pluralism,” which is used in a number of related ways. Some consider religious pluralism as a worldview which acknowledges that one’s religion is not the sole and exclusive source of truth, and admits that there are at least some truths and true value in other religions. Another definition of religious pluralism involves accepting the beliefs taught by other religions as true though they differ from the ones taught by one’s own religion. This involves an acceptance of the concept that all religions are valid though their beliefs appear to be conflicting.

A broader definition of religious pluralism includes in its primary meaning not only the acknowledgement of the fact of plurality and an acceptance of the validity of all religions, but also an active engagement with plurality in the form of inter-religious dialogue and cooperation. Thus, according to Diana Eck, “Pluralism is not the sheer fact of this plurality alone, but is active engagement with plurality. Pluralism and plurality are sometimes used as if they were synonymous. But plurality is just diversity, plain and simple—splendid, colorful, may be even threatening. Such diversity does not, however, have to affect me. I can observe diversity. I can even celebrate diversity, as the cliché goes. But I have to participate in pluralism requires the cultivation of public space where we all encounter one another.” Thus,

in the broader sense, religious pluralism involves not only the acceptance of the validity of other religions, but also dialogue among religions, where individuals of different religions discuss religious beliefs and learn from and work with each other without attempting to convince each other of the correctness of their individual set of beliefs.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Differentiate between plurality of religion and religious pluralism.

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16.2 CONDITIONS THAT PROMOTE OR HINDER RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

16.2.1 Conditions for the Existence of Religious Plurality

One of the necessary conditions for the existence of religious pluralism is the existence of freedom of religion. Religious diversity can exist only if there is freedom of religion. To have freedom of religion it is not necessary that an individual religion accepts that other religions are legitimate or that freedom of religion and religious plurality in general are good things. What is necessary is that religions accept to coexist, acting within a commonly accepted law of a particular region. Freedom of religion exists when different religions of a particular region possess the same rights of worship and public expression.

Some argue that religious freedom alone is not enough for religious pluralism to flourish. For religious pluralism to flourish there has to be mutual respect between different religious traditions. The required respect can be promoted by societal and theological change aimed to overcome religious differences between religions and denominations within the same religion.

Such a change can be introduced by a non-literal view of one's religious traditions and by emphasizing fundamental principles rather than more marginal issues. It is basically an attitude which rejects focus on immaterial differences, and instead gives respect to those beliefs held in common. It is clear that in such an atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation religious pluralism can flourish.

16.2.2 Conditions That Hinder Religious Pluralism

If religious freedom and respect for other religions promote religious pluralism, absence of religious freedom shuts out religious pluralism. In atheist countries there can be no religious pluralism, since in such countries there can be no religion at all.

Another factor that hinders religious pluralism is exclusivism. Exclusivist religions teach that theirs is the only way to truth and salvation; some of them would even argue that it is the duty of a true believer to wage jihad against the falsehoods taught by other religions. Some fundamentalist groups like the Taliban argue fiercely against other religions and teach that religious practices of liberal Muslims and of other religions are pernicious. This attitude led to the destruction of the Alexandrian library by Caliph Omar and of the ancient Buddha statues of Bamyán as well as to the Crusades and witch hunt of the Early Modern Period. Exclusivism cannot see any good in other religions or tolerate them. It is easy to see that where such an attitude prevails, there can be no religious pluralism. This situation obtains in certain Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia where no religion other than Islam is permitted.

A lesser form of exclusivism consists in giving one religion or denomination special rights that are denied to others. This situation obtains in certain Islamic countries where Shariat law is promulgated. Though less deplorable than exclusivism, this sort of preferential treatment is detrimental to religious pluralism.

16.3 PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSES TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

16.3.1 Analysis of Religious Concepts

One of the early responses to religious pluralism was to show a desire to study the religious

concepts of religions other than one's own. This gave rise to the branch of philosophy called comparative religion. Comparative religion is a field of religious study that analyzes the similarities and differences of themes, myths, rituals and concepts among the world's religions. In the field of comparative religion, the main world-religions are generally classified as Abrahamic, Indian or Taoic, and attempts are made to analyze the similarities and differences among the various ideational aspects of these religions. Thus attempts have been made to analyse Eastern descriptions of unitive mysticism; Hindu and Buddhist notions of reincarnation, centering on the question of personal identity from life to life; such Buddhist ideas as anatta ("no self"), sunyanta ("emptiness"); and a number of other important concepts. But much remains to be done and many other major concepts await attention, both individually and comparatively. Indeed, this area of philosophical inquiry has almost unlimited scope for development.

16.3.2 Reflecting on the Relationship among Religions

Another response to religious pluralism was to initiate a reflection on the relationship among various religions. This is one of the important philosophical questions in the area of religious pluralism, though naturalism, which views religion in all its forms as a delusory projection upon the universe of human hopes, fears, and ideals, dismisses it as a pseudo problem. Those who take the question seriously propose two different models of relationship which can be broadly classified into two groups: exclusivism and pluralism.

16.3.2.1 Exclusivism

Exclusivism addresses the problem of the relationship among religions in a simple way by dismissing as false all religions other than one's own. Basically, it is the view that there can only be one true religion. Other religions are dismissed as false and misleading, at least in so far as their beliefs are incompatible with those taught by one's own. This is the most widely-held view; most of the adherents of each religion (including some, but not all, of its reflective thinkers), at least implicitly assume this view.

However, a "hermeneutic of suspicion" is provoked by the evident fact that in almost all cases the religion one accepts (or against which one reacts) is selected by the accident of birth.

Someone born to devout Muslim parents in Iran or Indonesia is very likely to be a Muslim, someone born to devout Buddhist parents in Thailand or Sri Lanka is very likely to be a Buddhist, someone born to devout Christian parents in Italy or Mexico is very likely to be a Catholic Christian, and so on. Thus there is a certain non-rational arbitrariness in the claim that the particular tradition within which one happens to have been born is the one and only true religion. And if the conviction is added that salvation and eternal life depend upon accepting the truths of one's own religion, it may well seem unfair that this saving truth is known only to one group, into which only a minority of the human race have had the good fortune to be born.

This thought has been countered by some Christian philosophers by an appeal to God's foreknowledge. According to this proposal God knows that certain individuals would freely reject the Christian gospel, even if they had heard it. Those who had no opportunity to hear the Christian gospel are such people. This suggestion, which could of course be deployed from within each religion, involves an idea that is theologically objectionable to many, namely, that God has created vast numbers of people whom God knows will forfeit salvation.

To overcome this difficulty a separation is introduced between knowing the truth from receiving salvation. Then it is argued that though knowing truth is important, it is neither necessary, nor sufficient to attain salvation. It is claimed that some (or all) of those who do not in this life come to know the truth of the gospel may nevertheless, by divine grace, receive Christian salvation. Such people, it is suggested, may be counted now as "anonymous Christians." The question here is whether there is not still an arbitrary privileging of one's own religion as the sole channel of salvation. If each religion makes similar claims, it is difficult to see how such a dispute can be settled.

16.3.2.2 Pluralism

Uncomfortable with the implications of exclusivism, many contemporary thinkers look for pluralist views. Pluralist views in all its various forms reject the exclusivist view that there can only be one religion that knows the truth and is a locus of salvation, and accept that other traditions too can be sources of truth and salvation. The prominent pluralist views are: unity in diversity, complementarity of religions, and radical diversity.

The Transcendent Unity of Religions: One form of pluralism claims that the various historical

religions like Hinduism, Islam and Christianity are manifestations of a core universal religion. Thus, the pluralist view adopted by Frithjof Schuon, Rene Guenon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Huston Smith and others distinguishes between the esoteric religion of the mystics and the exoteric religions of the mass of believers. It is then claimed that the former is, in its innermost core, identical across the different religions, whereas the latter, consisting of culturally conditioned concepts, doctrines, imagery, lifestyle, and spiritual practices, differ and are indeed at many points mutually incompatible. Each exoteric tradition (historical Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) should accordingly maintain its own unique individuality, because each is a valid expression of the ultimate reality that is directly known by the mystics. Thus historical religions are seen as different manifestations of core experience; all religions are united at the level of this experience.

This view encounters two difficulties. First, by making mysticism the unifying core of religion, it relativizes historical manifestations. The second difficulty is more serious. The claim that the esoteric religion of the mystics is, in its innermost core, identical across the different religions, is not supported by facts. The fact is that descriptions of the mystics differ considerably. Whilst some mystics report union with a personal divine being, others report union with a nonpersonal reality, and still others report isolation or even blissful emptiness. Thus there seems to be no unity among esoteric traditions.

Complementarity of Religions: Ninian Smart and Keith Ward, while explaining the relationship among religions, stress the idea of the complementarity of the world religions. Ward speaks of “a Supreme Reality which wills all to be consciously related to it.” Complementary aspects of this Reality are revealed within the different world religions. Thus, for example, “the Semitic and Indian traditions are complementary, emphasizing the active and unchanging poles respectively of the Supreme Spiritual Reality to which they both seek to relate.” By their friendly interactions, each seeking to learn from the others, a “convergent spirituality” may emerge in ways which cannot be known in advance.

Radical Diversity: John Cobb denies any significant sort of relationship among religions. Each tradition is unique and independent; there is no unifying factor common to all religious forms. Not only the external expressions but even the Ultimates of religion are different. The personal God affirmed by monotheistic religions, for example, is different from the ever-changing, interdependent process of the universe (pratitya-samutpada) affirmed by Buddhism.

On this view, each religion is unique; there is no significant unity among them, except that of a common name and some of some external structural features like moral codes, belief-systems and ritual practices. But the contents of these differ. Thus there is radical diversity. The attempt to find a unifying common core is futile. The difficulty with this view is that it fails to explain why the various belief systems are called religions. Individuals of a class must some way related; they must have at least some central common elements.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. What are the two important ways in which the relationship between religions is conceived?

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16.3.3 Resolving Conflicting Truth Claims

The third philosophical response to religious pluralism focuses on solving the problem of conflicting truth claims of the different religions. Suggested solutions generally proceed on two lines. The first line inquires whether there is a way of rationally validating the claims of various religions. It looks for evidential support for and against each of the conflicting claims, believing that disagreements can be resolved by the strength of such evidence. The second line of inquiry tries to resolve the problem of conflicting truth claims with the help of the theories about the relationship among religions.

16.3.3.1 Solving Religious Conflicts with the Help of Evidence

Pre-Kantian philosophy, especially deist philosophy, believed that the central religious claims such as belief in God and the immortality of the soul can be proved rationally. But after Hume and Kant a widespread consensus emerged that the traditional theistic arguments fail to

prove religious claims—although there are prominent thinkers who resist this conclusions. However, attempts to validate religious claims were not given up. Instead of reason experience was proposed as a valid source of religious knowledge. It is argued that religious people report a wide range of forms of distinctively religious experience, including mystical experiences of direct awareness of, and even union with, God; a sense of divine presence in moments of worship or contemplation; an indirect consciousness of God in the feeling of absolute dependence upon a creator, or of a divine presence and activity mediated through the beauties and sublimities of nature, the claims of conscience, the profound significance of human love, the crises of birth and death, and many kinds of personal and historical events. Can such experiences count as good evidences for resolving disagreements?

The older kind of apologetic used religious experience as a source of knowledge about God and supernatural realities. This is open to the objection that such experiences may have a purely natural origin in the powers of the human imagination. Religious experience thus remains objectively ambiguous.

At this point the “principle of rational credulity” is invoked, according to which it is rational to trust our experience as a source of valid knowledge except in so far as we have reason to distrust it. We apply this principle in our ordinary experience of our physical environment: we do not need a reason to trust sense experience in general but rather a reason to distrust it on particular occasions. And it is claimed that the same principle should apply impartially to religious experience as well. *Prima facie* it is an awareness of a non-physical divine reality; and we must trust it insofar as we have no reason to distrust it.

Critics have raised two objections against treating religious experience on a par with sense experience. First, whereas sense experience is universal and compulsory, religious experience is optional and confined to a limited number of people, so that whilst sensory reports can in principle be confirmed by anyone, reports of religious experience cannot be; and second, whereas sense experience produces a universally agreed description of the physical world, religious experience within the different traditions produces different and often incompatible descriptions of the divine. Because of these reasons, critics reject the claim of parity of religious experience with sense experience. Thereby the principle of rational credulity is rendered inapplicable in the case of religious experience.

A positive argument against the reliability of religious experience as a valid source of

knowledge comes from the observation that it produces different and often incompatible descriptions of the object. Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Buddhist and other religious groups claim that their non-compatible beliefs correspond to their religious experiences. If their claim is true, from a religious point of view the question now becomes: Whose description is true? Which is the true religion? Since all of them claim the support of religious experience, all of them must be equally true, though they do not agree! Thus the fact of religious diversity and the inability of religious experience to settle the differences undermine the entire argument that religious experience has parity with sense experience in producing true beliefs and that it can be used to resolve religious differences.

16.3.3.2 Solving Religious Conflicts with the Help of Theories of Religion

Another way of solving the problem of conflicting truth claims relies on various interpretations of the relationship among religions. A variety of such interpretations of religion have been offered, each of which would solve the problem in its own way. The most important of them are naturalism, exclusivism, theory of transcendental unity, and complementarity theory.

Naturalism: Naturalism solves the problem in a simple way by denying its existence. It views all religious claims as false, arising from delusory projection upon the universe of human hopes, fears, and ideals. All religious claims of knowledge being false, their conflict does not present any problem. The difficulty with this view is that it does not take any religion seriously or offer constructive solution to the problem; it merely dismisses the problem as a pseudo problem. Consequently, many are dissatisfied with this approach, and insist on addressing the problem.

Those who take religion seriously insist that religious belief is not purely human projection. They admit that religious belief involves imaginative projection, but argue that it has high levels of cognitive content. According to them, religious beliefs, whilst obviously involving imaginative projection, attempt to describe experiences of a transcendent reality. When this view is adopted, the problem of conflicting truth claims is acute; and a variety of religious interpretations of religion have been offered to solve it, each of which would solve the problem in its own way.

Exclusivism: Unlike naturalism, exclusivism acknowledges the conflict as real. But having

acknowledged the existence of a real problem, exclusivism, like naturalism, offers a simple solution. When there is a conflict, the beliefs of one's own religion are to be accepted as true and the others are to be dismissed as false.

This view favors one religion holding it as the sole depository of truth while dismissing all other ones, especially those that disagree with the religion of one's choice, as propagators of error. However, a "hermeneutic of suspicion" is provoked by the way one happens to favor a religion. Most often the decision to favor a religion is prompted by the accident of birth, rather than rational considerations. Thus there is a certain non-rational arbitrariness in the choice of a religion to be accorded the status of being the one and only true religion. And if the conviction is added that salvation and eternal life depend upon accepting the truths of one's own religion, it may well seem unfair that this saving truth is known only to one group, into which only a minority of the human race have had the good fortune to be born.

The Transcendent Unity of Religions: The proponents of the transcendental unity of religions hold that the conflicts between the truth claims of religion are only apparent. Disagreements pertain to the nonessential externals of religion; they vanish at the source, where there is agreement. The pluralist view then tries to identify the common core of religion where disagreements vanish. This attempt has thrown up three suggestions.

In the first instance, a distinction is made between the esoteric religion of the mystics and the exoteric religions of the mass of believers, and it is claimed that the former is, in its innermostcore, identical across the different religions, whereas the latter, consisting of cultural elements, differ and are indeed at many points mutually incompatible. Religious disagreements can be overcome by concentrating on the esoteric religion of the mystics rather than the exoteric religion.

This view encounters two difficulties. First, it relativizes the different religious belief-systems and ways of life. Secondly, the claim that the esoteric religion of the mystics is identical across the different religions, is not borne out by facts. As a matter of fact, the descriptions of the mystics differ considerably. Whilst some mystics report union with a personal divine being, others report union with a nonpersonal reality, and still others report an annihilation of the self or a merger into a universal self, or even blissful emptiness. Thus there seems to be no agreement even at the level of esoteric religion. Consequently, the problem of

conflicting truth claims is left unsolved.

The second suggestion is based on a distinction between the core mystical experience and the report of that experience. It is suggested that the mystics of all tradition have similar experience, but while describing it, each one is obliged to rely on the concepts and thought-forms of one's own tradition. The differences in the description of the mystics are then attributed to varying theological interpretations of a common, ineffable experience.

Here it is disputed whether mysticism constitutes, as is claimed, a direct and unmediated awareness of the divine reality, or whether even this experience is conditioned by the thought-forms of the mystic's tradition. Are the differences in the reports of the mystics to be attributed to varying interpretations of a common, ineffable experience; or should we hold that a preconscious interpretative activity enters into the formation of the conscious experience, so that the mystics' actual experiences are characteristically different? If the differences in the reports of the mystics are indicative of genuinely different experiences, the attempt to find in a common mystical experience a unifying principle beyond the multiplicity of religious beliefs and practices stands checkmated.

The third suggestion is based upon a Kantian-type distinction between the Real (or the Divine or the Ultimate) in itself and the Real as humanly conceived and experienced. The Kantian-type hypothesis meets the problem of the conflicting truth claims of the different religions by proposing that they do not in fact conflict because they are claims about different manifestations of the Real to different human faith communities, each operating with its own conceptuality, spiritual practices, form of life, treasury of myths and stories, and historical memories. On this hypothesis, Reality is one, disagreements arise because this one reality is experienced in different ways. One of the significant critical questions about this hypothesis is whether in reducing the distinctive belief-systems of the different religions from absolute truths to reports of one human perception of the divine reality, it does not contradict the cherished self-understanding of each as the depository of truth.

Plurality of Ultimates: The logical ground for proposing a single Ultimate at the source of differing experiences has been subjected to scrutiny. Are the differences in the reports of the mystics merely a matter of different experiences of a single Ultimate or are they indicative of the existence of different Ultimates? If the differences are indicative of the existence of

different Ultimates, it easy to explain why religious claims conflict: the claims of different religions do not agree, because they describe different objects and experiences. Here the critical questions concern the relationship among the different Ultimates.

Complementarity Theory: According to this theory, the Supreme Reality reveals complementary aspects of itself within the different world religions. Disagreements arise because no religion possesses the entire truth. It is then claimed that through their friendly interactions, each seeking to learn from the others, a total picture will emerge and conflicts will be resolved. The question here is whether religious truths are varying revelations of the same reality, or whether they are descriptions of different Ultimates.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What are the major objections against equating religious experience with sense experience?

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16.4 PRACTICAL RESPONSE TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Irrespective of the way we view it, religious plurality is a statistical fact that we are called to live with. Therefore, the practical question is, how are we to interact with people of religious beliefs and practices other than our own? In this context, three practical steps are suggested: religious toleration, appreciating diversity, and religious dialogue.

i. Religious Toleration

Toleration in general is the enduring of something disagreeable. Thus it is different from indifference toward things that do not matter and also from broad-minded celebration of differences. It involves a decision to forgo using power or coercion to change the things we dislike; so it is not merely resignation at the inevitability of the disagreeable. Toleration involves having power to change the disagreeable, but not using it. Tolerating other's views and actions is quite compatible with trying to change another's mind, as long as one relies on rational persuasion—or, perhaps, emotional appeals—rather than blunt threats or subtle brainwashing.

Religious toleration is an aspect of toleration in general; it is enduring disagreeable religious differences which are either expressed or acted upon. It is not to be confused with secularization or erosion of religious devotion. It is also distinct from the sort of pluralistic ecumenicism that seeks consensus on central religious matters or views other religious beliefs as simply different routes to similar goals. We can believe that we are clearly right and others are egregiously wrong on a matter of huge and holy significance, and still decide not to use force or coercion to bring change in their beliefs and practices.

Philosophers have suggested various reasons for tolerance. Arguing pragmatically, Locke asserted that tolerance is necessary for civil peace. Then looking for rational grounds, he argued that any attempt to forcefully change other's religious beliefs and practices is "absolutely impertinent: because they are not proper to convince the mind." So coerced conversions are irrational not only because they are imprudent, but also downright self-contradictory, for "I cannot be saved by a Religion that I distrust, and by a Worship that I abhor. It is in vain for an Unbeliever to take up the outward shew of another mans profession. Faith only, and inward sincerity, are the things that procure acceptance with God."

Mill, on the other hand, bases his argument for toleration on individual liberty. In his work, *On Liberty*, right after noting that intolerance is so natural to humans, he asserts his "one very simple principle": no one shall interfere with the liberty of action of any of other except for self- protection. Combine this principle with a moral principle of respect for the individual and the individual's conscience and autonomy and we get classical liberalism's case for full toleration of religious practices—the contentious but peaceful coexistence of different religions in a neutral state.

ii. Appreciating and Encouraging Diversity

The arguments for religious toleration mentioned above must be distinguished from another consideration that Mill introduced, namely, the positive appreciation and promotion of diversity. Locke was not one to celebrate plurality; he merely argued the irrationality of not enduring it. One could go further and argue for actually appreciating and even promoting disagreeable practices. Thus an employer might set up work schedules that accommodate an employee's disagreeable religious practices, and a society may empower minorities to broadcast disagreeable viewpoints. Mill and others have argued that it is prudent for individuals and societies to promote the airing of what contradicts them, because that is how we correct our mistakes and arrive at better reasons and more truth. Democratic governments not only tolerate criticism, but set up structures like opposition parties and free media to air alternative, and often critical, views. Theists also can take a leaf out of their book and set up structures that would protect and promote the airing of alternative views. The motivation for this can come from a view that human comprehension of God's will is inherently limited and fallible. This view would yield a theologically based, epistemological humility that not only tolerates but also enables the expression of what seems to be heresy, since the latter might give new insights into what one already believes. It must be specially noted that for promoting such cooperation one need not necessarily accept that the other is right at least in some way; such openness to accommodate those who differ from us is consistent with viewing the other as being wrong in a disagreeable way.

iii. Interreligious or Interfaith Dialogue

Another practical way of responding to religious diversity is to engage in interfaith or inter-religious dialogue. The term interfaith dialogue refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions and spiritual or humanistic beliefs, at both the individual and institutional level with the aim of deriving understanding and cooperation and if possible, a common ground in belief. This can be achieved through a concentration on similarities between faiths, understanding of values, and commitment to the world. It is distinct from syncretism, in that dialogue often involves promoting understanding between different religions to increase acceptance of others, whereas to syncretism seeks to synthesize new beliefs fusing differing systems of belief. In dialogue no attempt is made

to fuse differing systems of belief; what is sought is positive interaction between people of different traditions and beliefs, aimed to promote mutual understanding and cooperation.

The major argument in favor of dialogue is that besides bringing deeper understanding among religions, it would help to resolve conflicts fueled by religion and promote cooperation among them to construct a better world. The resolve for dialogue can be further buttressed by the assumption that all spiritual and religious traditions are a source of values that ensure dignified life for all, so that if we want to live our faith with integrity, these traditions need to be jointly explored.

16.5 SECULARISM

Secularism, in a broader sense, is a resistance of religious hegemony and religious fundamentalism and also of exclusion that is based on religion or religious belief. Following this narrative, we can say that the general aim of secularism is to liberate social and political institutions from the hegemony of religion and to give the guarantee to an individual to choose or not to choose his/her own religion or religious faith. We can think of secularism that presupposes a ‘wall of separation’ or that presupposes ‘no wall of separation or partial wall of separation’.

The word ‘Secularism’ is derived from the Latin word *saeculum*, which means ‘this age’, ‘this time’ or ‘this world’. (T. N. Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds*, p. 6). Based on this derivative understanding of the word, we can say that secularism is a belief in the existence of ‘this world’ with a rejection of the belief of the lesser existence of ‘this world’ with respect to ‘other world’ (e.g., divine world). We can extend this understanding by saying that secularism believes in the equality of existence of each and every human existence. American Philosopher Ronald Dworkin distinguishes between ‘equal treatment’ and ‘treating everyone as equal’. Sometimes unequal treatment is necessity to treat everyone as equal. It will be an injustice to organize a competition among lion, fish, and squirrel where winner will be the one who climbs on the tree in a lesser time.

We can put the characteristics of a secular state in the following points:

1. Principle of non-establishment of religion

2. Principle of establishment of peace among communities
3. Religious freedom for all religions and religious communities
4. Religious freedom for people of all religions without any discrimination
5. Freedom to choose any religion and freedom not to choose religious belief or not to choose any religion
6. No discrimination in the name of religion in terms of endowment or help given by the state
7. No discrimination in the name of religion, like in the educational and health institutions.

(Rajeev Bhargav, 'Secularism' in *Political Theory: An Introduction*)

Generally, secularism is considered as a theory of separation between religious institution and political institution. Historically, it is emerged as a resistance of mediation of church or priest between God and believer of God. It is also believed that secularism was emerged to resolve the conflict between church and state. The division of work was made in such a way that the church will work in religious sphere and the state will work in political sphere and one will not intervene in the sphere of other. Accordingly, it can be said that state will remain neutral in religious matter. Neither the state will promote or support any religion or religious beliefs, acts, customs etc, nor the state will intervene in the religion or religious beliefs, acts, customs. All people will be considered equal irrespective of their religion or religious beliefs in the eye of the state.

This understanding of secularism has an assumption that religion is a private affair. It is a private affair between God and believer of God; between religious institution and believer of the religious faith preached by that religious institution. We can also derive from this assumption that the private affair will not affect people's public affair, and on the basis of this segregation between private and public affairs, the segregation between religious matters and political matters will become possible.

But is it really the case that one dimension of human life does not affect another dimension? Is it really the case that a person does not express his/her so called private affair into public affair? We can also think about the plausibility of segregation or separation between private and public affairs in our own lives. Is it possible to draw a clear line between private and public affairs in our lives?

Reflection on these questions pave the way to an-other story of secularism; an-other understanding of secularism. This understanding tells us that secularism is not a complete

separation between state and religious institution or we can say that state is not religion-neutral. Though there is no religion or religious beliefs of the state, but state can help any religious institution and intervene in the religious beliefs where the freedom and dignity of an individual will be violated or in danger, but the state will not discriminate among religions.

Some scholars try to present this as a version of secularism, that is germinated/originated in Indian mind and Indian constitution is a document of this kind of secularism.

Preamble of Indian constitution represents the secular nature of Indian constitution. It states the aim of Indian democratic state as freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship and equality of status and of opportunity for all citizens.

For example, Article 15 (1) states that the state would not discriminate with an individual on the basis of caste, creed, gender or religion, Article 25 of Indian constitution grants ‘freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion’. Article 27 states that no person could compel to give a tax that is used for promotion or fulfill the needs of a particular religion or religious belief.

There are many unique features of Indian version of secularism. Here we are mentioning only two features in brief. One is principled distance and second is contextual secularism. Indian version of secularism proposes that the state will make a principled distance with the religion, the state will only intervene in the religious matter, where secular values, like freedom, dignity will be hampered. Religion can also intervene in the state, if this is beneficial to nourish or promote the secular values. Otherwise, neither it will promote any religion, nor demote any religion. It

PONDER BOX-I

Think which articles of Indian constitution reflect secular values.

Think the examples from Indian history where you find secular values.

gives freedom to the religious minorities to establish their own educational institutions and gives the guarantee of religious freedom. (See, Rajeev Bhargav, ‘Secularism’ in *Political Theory: An Introduction*)

Contextual secularism shows multi valued nature of India. It is right that contextual secularism have conflict between two ideas and impermanent character, but this character paves the way to rethink, redefine and dialogue.

Some thinkers criticize Indian version of secularism on the basis of its flexibility. They argue that this flexibility and context-dependence is an obstacle to resolve the conflicts between state and religion, between different religions and individual and religion.

Obviously, we cannot deny this objection at the very outset, but we can think that this context-dependence provides a space to redefine secularism and it is very much coherent with the multivocal character of the term secularism. (See, T. N. Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds*, p. 5)

It is a general criticism that secularism is not the right model in the context of Indian society, because in India, there is plurality of religious faith, there is so many religions. You cannot make a wall of separation between state and religion. This is a valid criticism, but we can think over the secular structure of our constitution, we can see that it advocates a spirit of respect towards the religion with a critical attitude. It follows those Indian spirits who try to reform their religion, because they love their religion.

16.6 LET US SUM UP

To sum up, in our globalized and rapidly shrinking world, religious pluralism is obviously a major issue within the philosophy of religion. Besides the question of defining religious pluralism, discussion on the topic centers most frequently on two issues: the relation among the religions and the most appropriate response—both philosophical and practical—to the obvious fact of plurality. These issues present so obvious a challenge to philosophical speculation that it seems inevitable that they will be increasingly widely discussed in the coming decades.

16.7 KEY WORDS

Religious pluralism: an acceptance of the fact of religious diversity and of the concept that all religions are valid, though they differ from one's own.

Religious exclusivism: the view that dismisses as false all religions other than one's own.

Naturalism: The view that denies spiritual realities beyond nature and accepts nature as the ultimate reality. It views all religious claims as false, arising from delusory projection upon the universe of human hopes, fears, and ideals.

Religious toleration: It is enduring disagreeable religious differences which are either expressed or acted upon.

Secularization: Dismissing religion from public life, and in extreme cases total erosion of religious devotion.

Ecumenicism: A search for consensus on central religious matters, or a view that other religious beliefs are simply different routes to similar goals.

Interfaith dialogue: Cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions and spiritual or humanistic beliefs, at both the individual and institutional level with the aim of deriving understanding and cooperation and if possible, a common ground in belief.

16.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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16.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1. Some people make a distinction between religious plurality and religious pluralism, and define the former as the fact of religious diversity and the latter as a simple acknowledgement and acceptance of that fact.

Check Your Progress II

1. Those who take the question of the relationship between religions seriously propose two models of relationship: exclusivism and pluralism. Exclusivism addresses the problem in a simple way by dismissing as false all religions other than one's own. Basically, it is the view that there can only be one true religion. Other religions are dismissed as false and misleading, at least in so far as their beliefs are incompatible with those taught by one's own. Pluralism, on the other hand, rejects the exclusivist view and accepts that other traditions too can be sources of truth and salvation.

Check Your Progress III

1. Critics have raised two objections against treating religious experience on a par with sense experience. First, whereas sense experience is universal and compulsory, religious experience is optional and confined to a limited number of people, so that whilst sensory reports can in principle be confirmed by anyone, reports of religious experience cannot be; and second, whereas sense experience produces a universally agreed description of the physical world, religious experience within the different traditions produces different and often incompatible descriptions of the divine. Because of these reasons, critics reject the claim of parity of religious experience with sense experience. Thereby the principle of rational credulity is rendered inapplicable in the case of religious experience.

A positive argument against the reliability of religious experience as a valid source of knowledge comes from the observation that it produces different and often incompatible descriptions of the object. Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Buddhist and other religious

groups claim that their non-compatible beliefs correspond to their religious experiences. If their claim is true, from a religious point of view the question now becomes: Whose description is true? Which is the true religion? Since all of them claim the support of religious experience, all of them must be equally true, though they do not agree! Thus the fact of religious diversity and the inability of religious experience to settle the differences undermine the entire argument that religious experience has parity with sense experience in producing true beliefs and that it can be used to resolve religious differences.

