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### **Other World is Possible What Role Religion Can Play?**

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Can religion play a role in creating the other world? In view of aggressive globalisation taking place today the World Social Forum has given a slogan 'the other world is possible' and this world will not be what the lords of globalisation wish to create - a world full of greed, full of consumerism with its stress on 'having' rather than on 'being' as the noted psychologist Erich Fromm puts it aptly. The world as conceived by the lords of globalisation wants people to strive to have more and more so that they get rich materially and become poorer and poorer inwardly.

Of course this greed of few would impoverish millions of third world. They will slave it out so that these few could intensify their greed. This world will of course be full of injustices, conflict and violence. The richer countries like USA would attack the poorer countries under various excuses - to fight terror, to destroy weapons of mass destruction or under the pretext of regime change. Their powerful media, under the subtle control of these lords of greed would also make us believe terror is creation of religions like Islam. It is 'Islamic terrorists' who are destroying peace on earth whereas they are busy establishing peace, democracy and strengthening human rights.

Those who are opposed to globalisation, on the other hand, want to oppose actively the world these lords of greed are bent upon creating. They are dreaming of the other world where the whole emphasis is on justice, not on conflict and violence, on being, not on having, on enriching inner being, not on fattening purses, on need, not on greed. In this world human dignity and freedom will be respected and human worth will be judged by his compassion for others, not on exploitation of others. A world where driving passion will be creation of a new human being fired with enthusiasm for inner development and where all identities will creatively coexist and not in destructive confrontation.

Is this world possible? Yes and no. The optimists will say yes and struggle for it and pessimists say no and surrender to forces of injustice and violence. Is the other world a mere dream? Yes indeed it is a dream, a dream worth dreaming. After all revolutionaries dream of revolution, but not in passive sleep but in constant struggle. They believe in shaping their dream world through unceasing struggle.

No ideal reality can come into existence without first dreaming it. And no dream turns into reality without struggling for it. What religions can contribute to it? Is religion not cause of conflict? So think many rationalists. Do religions not bring conflict of identities? Is religion not responsible for all the violence in history. For crusades? For mass murders? For 9/11? For

terrorism? So is the perception of millions of people. Will the other world have any place for religious beliefs?

Yes, religion can have not only important place in the other world but it can contribute richly in the creation of this new world? Is it not a fact that all major religions dreamt of the other world? What Buddha's efforts were directed at? Did he not tell us to remove *dukkha* (suffering) from this world? Did he not tell us to be compassionate towards others? Did he not want us to control our greed? Did Ambedkar not think as late as second half of the twentieth century that liberation to dalits' sufferings will come through Buddhism?

Does Christ not give us message of love and non-violence? Did he not overturn the table of money changers in the temple? Did he not preach from the mount not to seek revenge if struck on one cheek but to turn the other to diffuse violence? Did he not seek company of poor and dispossessed as long as he lived? Did he not give health to the sick? Did he not infuse life into those who were dead as far as awareness of their rights was concerned? Did he not give them good tidings of the kingdom of God on earth i.e., rule of justice and peace? Rule of values of God, rule of mercy and compassion as God is merciful and just? Even Engles maintained that Christianity gave hope to the hopeless and to the slaves as we read in -Early History of Christianity - written by Engles.

Is Islam not religion of equality of all? And of justice and brotherhood? Does it not condemn strongly and unambiguously concentration of wealth? Does it not require believers to help the weaker sections of society like the poor, orphans, widows and workers through *zakat* (levy for the poor)? Does not Allah say in the Qur'an that weaker sections of the society (*mustad'ifun*) would inherit this earth and will become its leaders? Does Islam not give equality to men and women and uphold dignity of all human beings? Does it not declare in clear words that there is no compulsion in the matters of religion thus respecting the fundamental right of human beings to freedom of conscience? Does Qur'an not urge believers to free slaves and treat them with full dignity?

How do we define the other world? The other world which we dream of is the world where there will be full freedom and dignity for all. Weaker sections would either not be there in that world or they will be treated with full justice and dignity. No one will be exploited. The few shall not accumulate wealth and power. Everyone will be able to raise his/her head aloft. There will be no slavery or child labour. Majority will not toil to keep a small minority in comfort and luxury.

All religions have dreamt of that dream. However, the dream turned sour thanks to powerful vested interests.

One can argue that religion has always sided with the vested interests. Even Buddhist monks, who are not supposed to possess anything and even beg for their food established huge ashrams and accumulated wealth therein. They too tended to support the king or the

feudal or capitalist class of the time. One finds this in Buddhist countries like Thailand and elsewhere. Whether in the past or present, they stood with ruling classes.

Once the Roman Emperor embraced Christianity it became part of the ruling establishment and was seen siding with the rulers and ruling classes. Its teachings about love and presenting the other cheek were confined to Bible and were meant only for the weaker sections of society. The powerful were never governed by those teachings and the Church always sided with the powerful. The Church became totally insensitive to the sufferings of the poor though Christ had come as their Messiah.

The Church suppressed freedom of expression and oppressed and persecuted its opponents. It opposed all scientific inventions calling them ungodly. The case of Islam and Muslims was no different. Though there is no concept of priesthood in Qur'an, a class of '*ulema*' emerged who monopolised understanding of the Qur'an and did not permit ordinary Muslims to understand it.

Freedom of expression was suppressed in the name of Divine law. Most of the '*ulema*' supported ruling establishment of the time and even became part of it. They justified feudal land relations even though the Prophet (PBUH) had condemned share cropping in no uncertain terms. They also justified without hesitation accumulation of wealth and living in high style though the Prophet (PBUH) had prohibited wearing of silk and gold ornament by men and eating in silver and gold vessels.

Similarly the '*ulema*' opposed every scientific inventions of the time as an interference in the divine universe. They too persecuted their opponents using their power and influence in the king's court. As there was no concept of priesthood there is no concept of monarchy in Islam and yet the '*ulema*' became part of monarch's courts as if it was permitted by Islam.

Unfortunately this is the story of all revolutions. Any revolution which overthrows those rulers oppressing and exploiting soon itself becomes another powerful establishment and begins to oppress and exploit. That is why some thinkers talk of permanent revolution but this does not happen and revolutionary of one period become rulers of the other and oppose any further change or revolution and ruthlessly suppress those who continue to demand change.

To make the other world possible one will have to oppose present religious establishments. In fact all founders of religions like Buddha, Christ and Mohammad were subversives of ruling establishments of their time. Had they not subverted establishments of their own time they would have achieved nothing. Did Buddha not oppose the religious establishment of his time? Did Christ not choose to identify himself completely with the poor instead of Roman rulers?

Mohammad (PBUH) refused to be bought off by the rich traders of Mecca and instead worked for justice for the poor, the orphans and the slaves? He found his followers more among this section of society than among the rich and powerful. Thus the first step towards

promoting genuine religious spirit is to subvert the present ruling establishments and establish one which is sensitive to the suffering of the poor, the oppressed and exploited. The religious leaders, if they are true to the fundamental spirit of their faith should join all those who are working for making the other world possible.

If the religious leaders stand with the oppressed of the world, this world would be really different. The other world is the world with difference. In the other world religion will not be tool of exploitation in the hands of exploiters but it will be the powerful weapon in the hands of the poor and oppressed. Religion in that world will not be a tool in the hands of the rich but a rich resource for the poor.

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