

On the Idea of India

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India, to Rabindranath Tagore, is a great ocean of hu-manity, where streams of tribes from across the world came to merge into one. Lately a series of defiance to this historical truth has arisen; indeed fissures threatening the unity have become visible. Arguably the most influential political philosopher of the past century, John Rawls maintained: 'religious, philosophical, or moral unity is neither possible nor necessary for social unity.' Genuine social stability must be rooted in a reasonable conception of *right* and *justice*, 'affirmed by an overlapping consensus of comprehensive doctrines' [religious or nonreligious]. This essay is about how to form that consensus.

A Frame of Reference

Come the dogma of 'clash of civilizations', the horror of 9/1 I, the publication of cartoons of the Prophet in a Danish newspaper in 2005, and then the 2006 speech of Pope Benedict XVI at Regensburg, Germany, linking the Muslims with past violence, the distance between Christians and Muslims widened. It also prompted leading Muslim scholars to launch an appeal to the Pope for greater theological dialogue, called 'Common Word'. And so, the three-day talks in Rome took place beginning on November 4, 2008, attended by 24 religious leaders and scholars from each side.

The document, *Common Word*, was issued in October 2006, one month after the pontiff's Regensburg lecture quoting a 14th-century Byzantine emperor's accusation that Islam was spread with the sword. It was signed by some 300 leaders from Sunni, Shi'ite, Sufi and other Muslim traditions, and developed into a 'manifesto'. It examined founda-tional doctrines and stressed what it said were key similarities such as the belief in one God and the requirement for believers 'to love their neighbours as themselves'. Significantly the *Common Word* acknowledged that the Prophet of Islam was told the same truth that had already been revealed to Jewish and Christian prophets, including Jesus himself; and that Christianity and Islam worship the same God.

The summit devoted the first two days to discussion on divine love and loving one's neighbour. On the third day, Pope Benedict addressed the unprecedented Vatican audience. He urged Muslim religious leaders and scholars to join Christians in defending their common moral values and respect for human rights despite theological differences between them. "There is a great and vast field in which we can act together in defending and promoting the moral values which are part of our common heritage," the pontiff said. He continued: 'We should thus work together in promoting genuine respect for *the dignity of the human person* and fundamental *human rights*, even though our anthropological visions and our theologies justify this in different ways' (italics added). The Catholic-Muslim Forum, the official name of this dialogue, is set to take place every two years. It is now taking its first steps.

Some of those behind the *Common Word* initiative believe it has been too easy for radical or extremist Muslims to use the media to promote a distorted view of

Islam. One of their principal aims is to create a body that can speak authoritatively for mainstream Islam. Although the Pope can speak for about a billion Roman Catholics (roughly half of the world's Christian population), Islam has no central authority able to represent 1.3 billion faithful. They are also aiming to work out practical measures for resolving crises in Muslim-Christian relations, such as the angry controversy that followed the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad in Denmark.

Apart from practical mechanisms to cope with disagreements, the signatories to the *Common Word* are hoping for a measure of agreement on matters of fundamental belief, and for an exchange of reading-lists, each side providing the names of books that most accurately describe their values and traditions. They also want to extend the Christian-Muslim conversation to include the other Abrahamic religion, Judaism.

A central theme of Benedict's papacy has been to focus attention on the Christian roots of an increasingly secular Europe. On another occasion the pontiff said: 'an inter-religious dialogue in the strict sense of the word is not possible.' In theological terms, added the Pope, "a true dialogue is not possible without putting one's faith in parentheses." In his view, 'intercultural dialogue which deepens the cultural consequences of basic religious ideas' was important. He called for confronting 'in a *public forum* the cultural consequences of basic religious decisions.' The Pope gives priority to the practical aspects while the *Common Word* manifesto is engaged with both practical and theological issues. 'He's trying to get the Catholic-Muslim dialogue out of the clouds of theory and down to the brass tacks: how can we know the truth about how we ought to live together justly, despite basic creedal differences,' observed George Weigel, a Catholic scholar and biographer of Pope John Paul II.

Dialogues of the Triad

India might as well have a Hindu-Muslim-Christian Forum with a manifesto such as the *Common Word*. The manifesto would have two parts: the one about common elements between creeds, and the other about practical mechanisms to cope with disagreements.

Creedal : The Catholic-Muslim Forum has found a common ground in their belief in monotheism—one God. At its basic root, Hinduism also professes monotheism. The hymn in *Rigveda* (Mandal 10, Sukta 129, Verse 7) "The Song of Creation" to which Max Muller gave the title, "To the Unknown God", reads, in part, 'He, the first origin of this creation, whether he formed it all/ or did not form it./ Whose eye controls this world in highest heaven, he verily/ knows it, or perhaps he knows it not' (cited in Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p 80). The Creator is clearly referred to as 'He', in singular number, not plural; it means monotheism, not polytheism. After the universe was in place gods came into existence; some gods were products of man's imagination. 'A created god is no God at all', observes Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (*Indian Philosophy*, vol. I, p 90). 'The Vedic religion does not seem to be an idolatrous one. There was no temple for gods. Men had direct access with gods without any mediation. Gods were looked upon as friends of their worshipers.'

'The process of god-making in the factory of man's mind cannot be seen so clearly anywhere else as in the *Rigveda*,' (ibid, p 73). Everyone is entitled to

create a god or goddess of his imagination, which is essentially a finite, visible medium to contemplate the infinite, invisible Transcendent, and disposable at will after use. Recently, near an Employment Exchange in Kolkata, unemployed youths built a temple with a new god they made and named *Bekar Baba* (Lord Jobless).

After worship some gods are simply immersed in river. To be sure, gods are inferior to man, in Hindu theology. 'It might be noted that the polytheism of Hindus is of a very curious variety, for the *devas*, the shining ones or gods, for all their special powers are supposed to be a lower order of creation than man. Both the Hindus and Buddhists believe that human birth is the highest stage that the Being has reached on the road to self-realization. Even the *devas* can only achieve this freedom and realization through human birth. This conception is far removed from normal polytheism. Buddhists say that only man can attain the supreme consummation of Buddhishood' (Nehru, p 189).

For example, 'Indra was as subject to karma as an earthworm. Evil deeds would ultimately cause the fall of Indra from the worlds of the gods, ultimately to become an animal; the insect could, by good deeds in successive births, be reborn to human and then to the divine estate, though even that did not free him from the power of his further *karma*' (D D Kosambi, *Study of Indian History*, p 167). These Indian gods in action resemble the Greek gods of Homer. Jahangir, the son of Emperor Akbar, said 'the science of the Vedanta is the science of Sufism.' Sufism is akin to the Adaita (monotheist) Vedanta. Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of Shah Jahan, is the author of a book designed to prove that 'the differences between Hindu and Muslim are matters only of language and expression'.

Traditionally, a deity is a power connected with certain place and certain objects. By this definition, places of pilgrimage, shrines of saints, or objects considered sacred, are all deities. Most religious traditions have deities, worshiped with specified rituals. Religious, philosophical, or moral unity is neither possible nor necessary for social unity. What is essential for social stability is that people acknowledge and respect 'the dignity of the human person'. Human dignity is the fundamental provenience of justice, and right.

Practical : Among all countries of the world, India has the longest multicultural experience with the Muslim community, since the seventh century. 'It was not just a question of ethnic or doctrinal differences. Two opposed codes of social behaviour had collided: one universal, inflexible, authoritarian and obligatory, which upheld the equality of individual believers and theoretically promoted a strong sense of community; the other India-specific, sectional, discriminatory and hierarchical which denied equality and revelled in diversity. The social and cultural differences were as fundamental as they were obvious. Nonetheless a great acceptance, which would eventually lead to a glorious synthesis, was under way' (John Keay, *India : A History*, pp 277-79).

The process of social assimilation, however, was hardly articulated by the intellectuals. Hindu theologians and Muslim ulema never met; they had in effect played a rather negative role. Yet, 'wherever Hindu and Muslim lived and worked in close professional proximity, social exchange is evident.'

A clear message of this episode is that Christian, Hindu, and Muslim working together at all levels can rewrite new pages of social synthesis in India. They all

would benefit from having a Christian-Hindu-Muslim Forum modelled after the *Common Word* initiative, alluded above. □