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**RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN MARRIAGE:
IMPEDIMENT OR POSITIVE HELP?**

by

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However common and natural a state of life marriage may be, it has always been looked at as something sacred and so, as a state that needs, for its success and well-being, the blessings and even the support of religion. Because of this relationship of religion to marriage all religions hold special ceremonies to bless the marriages of their devotees. They also offer to married couples special instructions on the way that married life is to be carried out.

This link between marriage and religion is quite understandable. A good religious life is certainly the best safeguard for a good marriage. But the rather self-enclosed attitude that has characterized religions in the past has made it difficult for religious authorities to define with precision the nature of the religious adherence that is actually conducive to a good married life.

Religious uniformity in marriage

In the way in which marriage has been generally viewed by religions so far, good and wholesome marriages are possible only between members of the same fold. Because of this understanding, religions are almost unanimous in their disapproval of mixed marriages. In most religions, such marriages are considered not just harmful but even positively sinful.

In religions that claim to be divinely established, marriage with one of another faith is considered a betrayal of one's own faith and so, individuals attempting marriages outside the fold risk to get penalized and even excommunicated. This attitude may have got relaxed in the last few decades and the prohibition may not be so strictly enforced today as in earlier times, but the trend is in no way obsolete.

In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, mixed marriages are permitted on certain given conditions. The Catholic partner has to promise that the offspring will be brought up in the Catholic faith. But even when the promise is given, the ceremony performed over such couples is so mitigated and so unelaborate that one gets the impression that such marriages are more tolerated than approved.

This negative tendency is not totally absent even from religions that generally take a more liberal attitude to other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Hindus and Buddhists who marry outside the fold are viewed by members of their faith as persons who have broken away from their family traditions. Such individuals become almost automatically peripheral members of the community.

The assumption that religious uniformity is vital for a good marriage is thus not only a widespread one but also a long-standing and even a well established one. If it has not been challenged or controverted in public, this is because there seems to be, in the eyes of many, one strong argument in its favour. Marriage requires close communication. But close communication is not possible between people who speak two different languages. An Indian who knows only Hindi and a Chinese who knows only Chinese have little chance of exchanging ideas with each other. Just as much as Hindi and Chinese, Buddhism and Christianity,- and for that matter, any religion,- are, in this regard, basically a language.

As a language, religion has its own vocabulary. Creeds and codes, ceremonies and festivals are part of that vocabulary. Two persons who hold the same beliefs about heaven and hell or life after death and observe the same ceremonies at moments of birth, marriage and death have, quite naturally, a greater facility of communicating with each other than two persons of two different religions. It is this facility that has made many conclude that uniformity of religion is an indispensable requirement for the stability and the security of the married life.

This argument is however not as strong as it externally appears. A common mother tongue is in no way an absolute prerequisite for a fruitful conversation. As a matter of fact, we find many Indians and Chinese today engaging in conversation with each other. The division created between people by their mother tongue can easily be solved if they learn a second language of a more inter-national nature. Just as the problems created by the language of one's birth, those created by the religion of one's birth too can be overcome. If the correct steps are taken, inter-religious dialogue is as much a possibility as inter-racial dialogue.

If we go further, we will also see that religious uniformity in marriage has not contributed as much to the protection and well-being of marriage as is generally assumed. The institution we call marriage is today gravely threatened from many angles and, as a result, a large number of marriages are breaking down. A quarter of the marriages today end in divorce. One in five babies is born outside marriage. Abortion is frequent and has become an accepted procedure. A large number of teenagers leave their homes and end in pitiable conditions. All these are happening in spite of the fact that still today the larger number of marriages by far are between people of the same faith. The number of inter-religious marriages is still too negligible for the deteriorating trend to be attributable to that.

If that is so, then we have to say that the time is ripe to re-examine newly, boldly and without prejudice the justifiability of the traditional argument that good marriages are possible only between members of the same religion. There is, of course, no question about the basic fact

that religion contributes positively to a wholesome married life. But the question is about the exact type of religion that has the power to do so. It is false to assume that religion of any form could save marriage. The purpose of this paper is to find out what the religion of the authentic form is that has the power to ensure the security of marriage as an institution and also uplift it to the sublime reality that Nature has intended it to be.

Ambiguity of term 'religion'

There is not the least doubt that religion is one of the most commonly used words of our day. There is hardly a place or time where one does not risk hearing it. Many who use it, however, are not even aware how unclear a term it is. There is probably no word in the whole dictionary of which the meaning is more uncertain. It is so diversely interpreted that for some there is nothing so harmful as religion. According to them, religion disrupts the unity of society and keeps individuals internally imprisoned. It is a menace that has to be entirely done away with. According to others, there is nothing so humanizing as religion; nothing that makes people face life and even death so serenely, courageously and meaningfully as religion. Personally I think that both these views are correct. They refer to two different versions of religion. The ambiguity of the word "religion" is such that it has led religion scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith even to suggest that the word be totally dropped in discussions on religion! (1)

In the way in which it is most widely used, religion refers to a socio-cultural reality. A person is supposed to belong to a religion as long as he or she adheres to the beliefs and practices of a particular group. A person who conforms to the beliefs and practices of the Buddhist group is given the label "Buddhist". The same is true of those who bear the labels "Christian", "Hindu" or "Muslim". Religion of that group-form is more often than not a matter of birth. A person who is born to a particular family, or within a particular race or region belongs to the religion of that family, race, or region.

Religion of the Group-form

This is an unfortunate aspect of contemporary religion that many today do not give sufficient thought to. But it is an aspect that people of our day should, for the very cause of religion, be awakened to. I have been personally enlightened by a story published with that aim in a book on Christianity meant for students of World Religions. The story was presented in the form of a dialogue between a teacher and a pupil imaginatively situated in a French context. The dialogue is as follows:

Kathleen, what is your nationality?

Sir, my nationality is French.

What is your religion?

Sir, my religion is Christianity.

Kathleen, what would your religion 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.

Kathleen, 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, very likely my religion would have been Islam.

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

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

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

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

If so, Kathleen, is it right for us to look down on people of other nationalities and other religions? (2)

This story, however harmless it may seem, contains a pill that many of us will find too bitter to swallow. It is as it were an elaboration of the well known Latin adage "Cujus regio, ejus religio", "Whose region, his religion". According to that assertion, the religion of a country is the religion of its king.

It goes without saying that religion which is identifiable with race or region cannot be expected to be the best safeguard for marriage. Marriage is a matter of life and living. Pure conformity to beliefs and practices of one's group cannot offer the strength that a married couple require to cope with the difficult demands of marital life.

Lesson from the Buddha

It is here that we are obliged to sit down and ask what religion of the true and meaningful form stands for. Out of the confusing maze of interpretations attached to it, to draw out the one that is authentic is no easy task. One great analyst of religion who could be of great help to us in this regard is, without any doubt, Gothama the Buddha who lived in India five hundred years before Christ. I am taking him here not so much as the founder of the religion called Buddhism, but as one of the leading thinkers in the history of mankind who took the trouble to ask what religion is all about and what religion of the humanly meaningful form has to be. I can't think of any other who has confronted the issue of the meaning and purpose of religion so bluntly and boldly as he.

The Buddha lived in an environment in which people understood religion in various ways and practised it in diverse forms. As a person sincerely interested in religion and seeking to benefit from it, he was,

quite naturally, disturbed. He did not know which version of religion to turn to. He experimented with a number of them. Nothing gave him the relief that he sought. It was this state of dissatisfaction that compelled him to ask what religion was all about, what it was for, and what it had to offer to a human being.

His analysis as well as his conclusion he presented in his sermon popularly known as the Sermon of the Four Noble Truths. The sermon which happened to be his very first, has always been considered by Buddhists as also the most important of all his sermons. But the sermon is of equally great value to a non-Buddhist. To anybody in search of the deeper sense in which religion has to be taken, the sermon offers a rare and immeasurably valuable clue.

The sermon, of course, was given in a particular context. It was addressed to a group of monks who took asceticism of the self-torturing type as the highest form of religion. To correct their misapprehension, he pointed out that religion of the truly beneficial form had to be a Middle Path. Real religion was neither disordinate sense pleasure on one side, nor meaningless self-torture on the other. It lay in between. Without stopping with that clarification, the Buddha made use of the opportunity to present his own analysis of religion underlining very particularly what he considered to be the most meaningful pattern of religious living. This he did very succinctly and very logically for the benefit of anybody inquiring into the primary meaning and function of religion. In his own words, the main part of the sermon is as follows:

Avoiding both these extremes, monks, take the Middle Path...which brings insight, brings knowledge, and leads to tranquillity, to full knowledge, to full enlightenment, to Nirvana.

Now, monks, this is the first Noble Truth as to sorrow. Birth (earthly existence) indeed is sorrowful. Disease, death, union with the unpleasing, separation from the pleasing is sorrowful. In brief, desirous transient individuality (five grasping aggregates) is sorrowful.

This, monks, is the Noble Truth as to the origin of sorrow. It is the recurring greed, associated with enjoyment and desire and seeking pleasure everywhere, which is the cause of this sorrow.

This monks, is the Noble Truth as to the cessation of sorrow... the complete cessation, giving up, abandoning, release and detachment from greed.

And this, monks, is the Noble Truth as to the path to the cessation of sorrow. It is the Noble Eightfold Path: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. The Middle Path, monks, leads to Nirvana (3).

The logical sequence of this text, as of any text coming down from ancient times, is not likely to be self-evident to one who reads it for the first time. The four statements contained in it and called "truths"

are really component parts of one logical argument. The first three "truths" are the premises of the argument, and the last one, the conclusion that flows from them. Through that argument the Buddha shows what real religion has to be by pointing out first what the actual need for religion is.

Religious Liberation according to the Buddha

The first statement focusses attention on the tragic situation that all human beings find themselves in. If human beings only care to look deep into themselves, they are bound to discover that at the most common level of existence, their life is one of discontentment and peacelessness. Even people who are quite healthy physically, well qualified academically, very comfortable materially are, for some reason or other, not fully happy or content. Deep within themselves, all human beings are sick. The Buddha found no better word to describe this state than the simple word "suffering" (in Pali, 'Dukkha'). This unfortunate reality kept people imprisoned in a sub-human level of existence.

In the second truth, he stated what he considered to be the root cause of this sad situation. It was a certain disorientation of the mind. Human beings were internally pressurized by an insatiable desire to seek pleasure through the appeasement of the senses. He referred to this situation again in one Pali word, namely "tanha". It meant "greed" or "over-attachment".

Those two statements could give the impression to a reader that the Buddha was very pessimistic in his understanding of life. But what he says through them is not very different from what the Bible says about the "fall of man". The Buddha's aim however, was not to stop with the sad side of life but to show that there was a way out of it. Human beings could rise from their innate ("fallen") state. They could grow up to a fuller human level of existence. The way, as given in the third "truth" was that of detachment and selflessness. He referred to this state of a correctly oriented mind as "Nibbana" (in Pali) or "Nirvana" (in Sanskrit). The word simply means "non-attachment to one's self", or, in other words, "non-self-centredness" or "non-selfishness". If positively expressed, it meant true liberty of the mind, inner happiness, or human behaviour of the noblest form.

For the Buddha, it was exactly here that religion came in. Religion had just one purpose, namely, to liberate human beings from the sub-human level of their existence and uplift them to a level that was fully human. Religion for him thus was basically a path to character-upliftment or personality-transformation.

If the goal of religion was that, then there had to be a pattern of life that was in keeping with the goal. In the fourth "truth", which was really the conclusion flowing from his argument, the Buddha outlined that pattern pointing to eight elements that were basic to it. Taking them together, he called the pattern the "Eightfold Path". It began with "Right Understanding". Human beings can outgrow their sub-humanness only if their struggle for it was based on a right insight into life's reality. The second characteristic of a noble human life was "Right Thought", or

thoughts of good will and non-violence. Other features of such a life were right speech, right action, right form of livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness (or constant alertness to the state of one's mind and to life's reality), and finally, right concentration of mind.

The unexpressed implication of the Eightfold Path is that human beings, at the customary sub-human level of their existence, adhere to a behaviour characterized by a wrong understanding of life, wrong thoughts, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness and wrong concentration of mind. In other words, their life was governed by wrong tendencies such as those of pride, hatred, and lust.

When taken as an exposition of right religious living, the Eightfold Path, of course, could raise a question to those who usually associate worship of God or rites and ritual with religion. These are left unmentioned in his Path. But the Buddha's language here is at a much deeper level than that of those who identify religion with rite and ritual. The Buddha is going beneath the symbols of rite and ritual to spotlight what is symbolized by them. The deeper reality beneath rite and ritual is day to day behaviour of the non-self-centred or the rightly oriented form. (4)

It is of course not absolutely necessary for one to agree with every detail of this sermon to be able to appreciate the main lesson that it teaches. Even one who may not subscribe fully to the Buddha's teaching has still to grant that the sermon contains a clarification of a rare stature on the correct sense in which religion has to be taken. Religion, if it is to be the sublime reality that it is proclaimed to be, has to have a sublime purpose.

As the Buddha saw it, this was nothing other than liberation. Human beings needed liberation from the mental disorientations that kept them internally imprisoned. All human beings, as a matter of fact, were searching for that liberation. They are all yearning at every moment to pass from the less human to the more human. There is not a single human being, not even the worst criminal, who is not, at least subconsciously, aspiring for the state of true human nobility. If the Buddha referred to the four "truths" as four "Noble Truths", and the "Eightfold Path" as the "Noble Eightfold Path", this is because he saw religion as a path to true human nobility. Religion was thus for the ennoblement or full humanization of sub-human human beings. It had something more to do than just safeguard the uniformity of a community by making its members conform to an accepted set of beliefs and practices.

Religion and Humanization

The greatest shortcoming of people who talk of religion today is that they do not distinguish well enough between the notion of Religion and that of a religion. The real issue today is not so much what this or that religion is, but what Religion is in its most fundamental form. It is only when we discover religion in its fundamental form that we are in a position to distinguish the kernel of religion from its shell. To understand this or that religion is not so difficult. Religions of the institutionalized form are relatively recent in origin. But Religion of the liberational form existed long before institutional religions came into existence. It started

the very first day that a human being appeared on the earth. The Buddha gave only a Buddhist interpretation of that religion, Christ, a Christian one, and Mohommed, a Muslim one. To understand religion of that original form we have naturally to go to its roots.

Religion may have many anthropological and sociological roots, but its main root and the one that is characteristically religious is in the element that makes a human being existentially different from an animal. A human being is existentially different, for instance, from a bird. A bird by the very fact that it is born a bird, lives as a bird and dies as a bird. Human beings are not so. They may be born human, but they can live and die as sub-human, non-human and even inhuman beings. Humanness is not innate. It has to be acquired. Further, humanness of the highest stature is not easy to achieve. It has to be striven for, and paths leading to it, found. Human beings have had an insight into that truth from the very beginning. It is this age-old insight into the high stature of true humanness and the need to acquire it that is at the heart of religion. Thus true religiousness becomes true humanness.

It is rather unfortunate that many today tend to get shocked when they hear religion equated with humanness. They cannot, of course, be blamed for it. The fault is in the system of religious education that has prevailed so far. Religious education, as is largely practised still today, is education on this or that religion. Education that is concerned exclusively with "a religion", quite naturally does not bother to begin by clarifying what Religion is. It does not pay sufficient attention to what the properties are that characterize Religion.

Religious educators, for instance,-- and at one level or other, we are all religious educators,-- have never never been introspective enough to see that religion is based on insight (a seeing into) and not on sense knowledge or argumentative logic built on sense perception. It is not without reason that the Buddha started his Eightfold Path with "Right Understanding". The Pali word he used was "samma ditthi" which meant "right vision or insight into the reality of life". Insight is what we also call "wisdom" or "faith". Faith sees aspects of life that the physical eye cannot see.

Because it is based on insight, religion has a language of its own. It is essentially pictorial, symbolic, imagerial. That is why we find every religion talking, in one way or another, of God, gods, and goddesses, revelations and incarnations, rebirths, revivals and resurrections, angels and devils, hells and heavens. This language of religion has to be correctly deciphered. For that, without stopping at the symbol, we must go to the reality symbolized. To interpret religious language literally is to distort it. It must be interpreted religiously and realistically. It is because of our failure to do so that people today have difficulty in seeing any connection between religion and humanness. They will look at anybody who explains religion in terms of humanness as a destroyer of faith. What is really destroyed thereby however, is not faith but fantasy. That is also why we have to say that if people (whether they be Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, or Muslims) are to understand their own religion meaningfully and practise it beneficially, they must first pass over from a religion of fantasy (and often fanaticism) into a religion of faith.

Religion and Marriage

It is this lack of correct understanding of what religion is at its core, that makes most people, and particularly religious leaders, adamant in their belief that the best safeguard for a wholesome marriage is the uniformity of faith of the marrying partners. Those who adhere to that belief are unaware that thereby they are doing damage not only to religion but to marriage itself.

If there is one requirement that a successful marriage obligatorily calls for, it is adulthood. Marriage is for people who are grown up. Adulthood can be taken, of course, in purely a physical sense. A person who is bodily grown and organically developed, particularly in the sphere of the generative faculties, is an adult. It is however wrong to think, as unfortunately many today do, that physical adulthood alone is sufficient for marriage. Marriage of the truly meaningful form, namely of the level that Nature intended it to be, calls for an inner or mental adulthood. The most characteristic element of that form of adulthood, as the Buddha underlined, is the spirit of selflessness. It is the selflessness or the non-self-centredness of each marriage partner that can contribute most to the true oneness between them.

It is the development of this form of adulthood that is at the heart of religion. It is only religion which is concerned with adulthood that we have to take as the real safeguard for marriage. Since religion leads to adulthood and marriage requires adulthood, the two are closely related. True religion leads to good marriage; and good marriage to true religion. This is because at the basis of both is the sublime human quality of selflessness.

Religious Diversity in Marriage

When religion and marriage are taken in that deeper dimension, then one begins to realize that uniformity of religion is not what is really required for a good marriage. What is required is a uniform level of religiousness of the correct form, or in other words, a uniform level of mental adulthood. Marriage is best safeguarded when the two partners are constantly striving to pass from the less human to the more human in their day to day life and are also helping each other to do so.

Whatever the traditional assumption be, diversity of religion is in no way a bar even to the real religiousness of the two partners. On the contrary, often it can be a positive help. It can help them to outgrow the superficial understanding of religion that they are likely to have inherited through the narrow interpretations commonly attached to their individual religions.

Seen from another angle, inter-religious marriages become not only justifiable, but even positively desirable today. Mixed marriages are becoming more and more a human need of our times. This is because the world of today is different from that of yesterday. In the past, the world was large, and communities within it lived isolated and so, separated from each other. The need for marriage, or even just dialogue, between races as well as religions did not exist then for the simple reason that the possibility

for it did not exist. But today the world has contracted and communities have come closer to each other.

Inter-communication between different racial and religious groups has become an obligatory requirement of modern life. People today have inevitably to accept that they belong not just to their small racial or religious group but equally to the global family of mankind. As a result, this is no longer the time for the rebuilding of the old walls that keep people secluded from each other. What we have today to labour at is the building of new bridges that will unite people. It is a happy sign that the number of inter-racial marriages has begun to grow in recent times. It is only to be hoped that inter-religious marriages will grow as steadily.

People who enter inter-religious marriages have no reason whatsoever to fear that this will be an obstacle to a truly peaceful and happy marriage. As a Buddhist married to a Christian, I can, in my own little way testify to that. Diversity of marriage can be a positive help for a happy marriage because it makes the marriage partners discover the exact demands of both good marriage and true religion. It has necessarily to be so, because both marriage and religion are Nature-ordained realities open to the whole of mankind, and not man-made realities restricted to this or that group.



End notes:

- 1) Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, (London, SPCK, 1978) p.198
- 2) Antony Fernando, *Christianity Made Intelligible (as one of the world's religions)*, (Inter-cultural Book Promoters, Kadawata, Sri Lanka, 1990) p 149
- 3) Vinaya Pitaka, *Mahavagga*, 10, ch.1, VI: 17-23
- 4) For a more detailed analysis of the Sermon of the Four Noble Truths, see: Antony Fernando with Leonard Swidler, *Buddhism Made Plain*, (Orbis, New York, Fourth printing 1990)