

Chairman's Address

ZAKIR HUSAIN

Excerpted from the inaugural address delivered at the first International Seminar hosted by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, on "Religion and Society", in October, 1965. At the time of delivering the address the speaker was Vice President of India and the President of the Institute. The excerpt excludes only the formal portions of his speech.

—Ed.

We are gathered here this afternoon to apply ourselves to the study of a serious and fairly difficult subject, Religion and Society, at this Seminar, the first one to be held by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study. . . . I have been in education most of my active life and it seems to me that education is a field in which religion and society meet and we can never do too much to make this meeting fruitful. For over a century now religious instruction has been systematically excluded from our organized education, and what is called modernism and sometimes liberalism, has looked upon religious people and religious ideas with lofty condescension. We have been visited with one disaster, the partition of the country, because unscrupulous and not infrequently irreligious politicians exploited the religious sentiments of simple people, and we see another disaster in the offing because of the increasing disregard for human and moral values in the youth due to a growing estrangement from religious traditions and all but total lack of occasion for any deep religious experience. Education does precious little to correct this and no effort is made to distinguish between the religion that seeks to divide humanity into warring camps and religion that gives meaning to life and lends eternity to its moments. This is a fatal defect and I hope this Seminar will help in elucidating steps that may be necessary to remove this serious shortcoming in our education. I have not forgotten that we are a secular society, and make bold to think that it is only a secular society untrammelled by denominational

commitments that can hope to do so with some measure of success. In a democracy, all questions tend to be political questions, and politics and religion make rather uncongenial company. Politics looks outward and religion inward; politics values success, religion fulfilment.

In modern times, a compromise has been made by asking religion to mind its own business, and it is left alone, if it does not attempt to make politics a part of its business. The sphere of religion has been circumscribed by emphasizing the distinction between knowledge and belief, and the sphere of politics defined so as to include all that concerns the public interest and social order. To cover up this compromise, as it were, tolerance in matters of religion has been upheld as a necessary civic virtue, and intolerance condemned as unsocial. Intolerance in the sense of a divisive fanaticism is, indeed, unsocial. But is tolerance in the sense of indifference to ultimate choices a desirable quality or is it commended because it means deep and understanding respect of the standpoint of others in things that matter and because it implies a belief in the essential unity of all religions? A facile cocksureness in the proper differentiation between these diametrically different attitudes is well worth consideration by this Seminar.

The educational processes of the educational organization and the political processes of a nascent democratic state do not seem to have helped in any considerable degree in a proper understanding of the nature of religion, of religion as an experience, of religion as an organizational force, of tolerance as a cover for unsound logic or tolerance as a result of the cosmic comprehensiveness of the mind, and of the consciousness of a common whence and a common whither. Our present institutions, that is my point, are not able to give one the religion of the right kind, and to have been saved from religion of the wrong kind is mighty little to inspire confidence.

There is another point which I wish to place before this Seminar that will consider the nature of religion and its interaction with society, and it is this. It is possible these days to make a study of religion, to compare and contrast religions, to follow religious beliefs and ideas to their sociological or anthropological sources for purely academic purposes. I have not made such a study. But I feel that even if I had made it, I would have but acquired information and been able to utilize an occasion such as this for passing it on to others in the hope that they did not already possess what I was giving them, but I am afraid I would have not known religion. I would not have been able to select

the vital and vitalizing religious ideas because I had myself not been vitalized by them and religion divested of its power to vitalize, is not even husk. It is mere chaff.

But then, who can be supposed to know religion, you might ask. Edward Spranger in a masterly study of the psychological types has placed the religious man as a type by himself. But Spranger's religious man would not I am afraid, have attended a Seminar like this knowing it would be an assembly of men of learning who would listen to him courteously, make polite comments, agree or disagree with qualifications and reservations and then proceed to the next item on their intellectual agenda. Spranger's religious man would ask for men whose eyes were bursting with tears and hearts almost broken, because perfect belief in perfect truth has not been attained, indeed, appeared to be unattainable because of the many physical and mental obstacles, because of the weakness of the human will, because of the frailty of human nature and most of all because their own passion for such attainment was still not potent enough. The religious man, in other words, is concerned only with the Perfect, the Absolute, with God. When he operates in society, he does so only to make the social existence approach his vision of the Perfect, the Absolute, his vision of the Good, of the Just.

We had a religious man, true to type, in Mahatma Gandhi. We can sing his praises, we can flatter ourselves by saying that we followed him. But many of us, so called intellectuals, were worried all the time by the apparent irrelevance of what he said and did outside the sphere of politics. What, many of us kept on asking, is the value of being religious in the present age? We need industry, we need scientists and engineers, we need beneficial and effective economic policies, we need prosperity and happiness which only prosperity can bring. Why talk of God, of an inner sight, why make experiments with Truth when the whole physical and social world is filled with material that invites experimentation?

This type of questioning arises out of our awareness of the contemporary situation. It is from the world around us that we have acquired the notion that so long as our society and we ourselves individually can achieve the success we have promised ourselves, the rest does not matter. We rejoice to think we have universities, scholars, libraries, we have knowledge and are participating in its transmission and yes, even advancement. We feel, it seems, we know so much that what we do not know—those little things, for instance, if man has a

soul, or an after-life, if life has a meaning and a context—these little things can safely be ignored.

If we probe deep enough, however, we shall find that the technological Pieties which have cast their spell on us live under a great strain. I do not imagine they will die of it or even fall terribly sick. Hordes of animal societies have survived in health without that knowledge. But those members of these technological societies who are most sensitive and in a way therefore most indicative of their future, those who have explored the world of relative values and moral uncertainties to the limit, are being troubled more and more with a sense of futility. Some make brilliant literary performances out of what is really just gnashing of the teeth, some find refuge in dogma. The grinding of the technological machine reduces them to dust. Peace and prosperity without seems nowhere to compensate for the lack of peace within. As the world becomes more and more industrialized and more and more people learn the art of mechanical living, the phenomenon of the mechanized individual will multiply. And then there may be nothing to which men can look forward.

Let me assure you that I am not in disagreement with any of the social, economic and educational policies of my country. They too are an expression, even though unconsciously perhaps, of the religious spirit, for the religious spirit is the fountain-head of the aspiration of man to serve his fellow-men, to establish equality and justice, to abolish ignorance, pain and sorrow. What I cannot help asking myself, however, is whether there is such a thing as a deep religious inspiration of the individual and a spiritual commitment as such or whether society and its 'progress' and prosperity are the sole and final arbiters of what any of its members might aspire to. Are the creative sources of social action in the individual soul sealed or do they still flow? Has the real ceased to exist or has it merged so completely with the unreal as to have become a relative value? Has spiritual life, perhaps, become so universal and all pervading that darkness is merely a sensation of the past? Has fulfilment, personal fulfilment, no longer any meaning? Or, do we all find it in due course, so that striving for it is no longer necessary? Is the law of Karma still operative or are all actions permitted by the law incapable of having any remote consequences or reactions? Iqbal assured his generation that the true believer, the Man of God, had the power to change the decrees of fate. Does that relationship between man and God still persist? Is man still God's representative on earth, as Azad made us believe in his irresistible style, is he still bound by the

command to create, to foster and to nourish, like his Creator, in whose image he has been fashioned? Was the great poet and mystic, Rumi, wasting his breath or giving his fellowmen the most valuable advice when he said:

تشنگان جویند آب اندر جهان — آب ہم جوید بہ عالم تشنگان
 آب کم جو تشنگی آور بدست — تا بجوشد اہت از بالا و پست

Men seek water in this world to quench their thirst, but know that water also longs for those that are thirsty. Do not rush about in search of water; acquire the unquenchable thirst, that water may gush forth for thee from above and from below'.

I have neither the wisdom nor courage to attempt an answer to these questions. But I would feel deeply ashamed, indeed, if they appeared to be no longer real, and would venture to submit that even if we have reason to wishfully believe that our society has still a moral orientation, let us follow the religious man in fearing that the orientation is perhaps not definite and dependable enough, that there is still everything to do, everything to strive for, and yes, everything to fear. . . .