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Chapter 6: Religious Pluralism (Part 4)

In the last session, I promised to explain the relationship between pluralism and liberalism and to give answers to the questions raised therein.

The Relationship between Pluralism and Liberalism

In order to explain the relationship between pluralism and liberalism, at the outset, we have to clarify the meaning of these two terms. In the earlier sessions, enough explanation was made regarding the concept of pluralism, but we have to explain here the concept of liberalism.

Lexically, liberalism means "freedom" and technically, it can be said that liberalism is an ideology on the basis of which, man should act the way he likes in life and no external factor or condition and circumstance should set limit on his action except in a situation when in the end, his action encroaches upon the freedom and endangers the safety of others. Liberalism has been discussed mainly in three important domains; economics, politics, and religion and culture.

Economic liberalism means that economic activity in the society should be totally free and any one can produce any commodity he likes and present and sell it in whatever way he likes. In sum, based on economic liberalism, there should be no restriction of any kind in the areas of production, determining the primary goods, advertisement, distribution, investment, and other cases related to the economic domain except that which infringes upon the liberty and jeopardizes others.

In the political sphere, liberalism means that in choosing the type and form of government, the ruling individuals, the laws governing the society, and other political actions, people must be totally free and they have the right to act in whatever way they like except in cases where they contradict the liberty and security of others.

The term "liberalism" is sometimes used in the sphere of culture especially in religion and belief. It is said that the first person who has applied the term "liberalism" in the realm of religion is Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) who made use of the term "liberal Protestantism" and from then on, this

term has been more or less applied in religion. In any case, what is meant by religious liberalism is that the people are free to choose any religion they want, or in principle, the acceptance or rejection of the essence of religion and religious laws, and no limitation and restriction should be imposed upon them in this regard.

If we discuss liberalism in the economic and political realms, we will not find any direct connection to religious pluralism. But if we broaden it and in addition to economic liberalism and political liberalism, we entertain religious liberalism, then the relationship between liberalism and pluralism will be established in the sense that the requisite of man being free to choose a religion and act according to its ordinances or otherwise (religious liberalism) is that we regard as acceptable the diverse religions in terms of their truthfulness. In this way, in terms of the existing four types of logical relations among concepts (equality, absolute general and particular, non-absolute general and particular, contrast), the relationship between liberalism and religious pluralism shall be that of absolute general and particular; that is, religious pluralism is always a manifestation of liberalism but not every type of liberalism is a manifestation of religious pluralism. For example, political liberalism is a manifestation of liberalism but not a manifestation of religious pluralism.

Of course, if we tackle pluralism even in other areas such as political, economic and epistemological pluralism, as we did in the previous sessions, then the relationship between liberalism and pluralism will change.

At any rate, without taking into account the historical trend and the evolution of these two concepts, the relationship between them is as what we have explained. But historically, liberal thought was apparently prior to pluralism and even secularism.

A Review of the Motive behind the Emergence of Religious Pluralism

In earlier sessions, some points have been mentioned about the motive behind the emergence of pluralism and we have indicated that one of the important motives behind it was to put an end to war and bloodshed as the result of religious differences and it was first mentioned in Christianity. As it is known to you, after Martin Luther, a German priest, founded the Protestant Church in Christianity and a relatively large number of Christians gradually followed him, bloody wars and conflicts between the Catholics and Protestants ensued and persisted, and it still continues in some places such as Northern Ireland of the United Kingdom. Prior to it, there was also a conflict between the followers of two Christian sects, viz. Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity.

With the aim of putting an end to the sectarian conflicts, some Christian scholars and theologians propounded the theory of pluralism in Christianity, saying that for eternal deliverance and salvation, it is enough that we are Christians, and there is no difference among the Orthodox Christians, Catholics and

Protestants.

Later on, because of the perennial conflicts existing between the Christians and the Jews and in order to put an end to these conflicts, pluralism between Christianity and Judaism was also advanced and efforts were made to eliminate the ground for these conflicts. For instance, one of the Christian rituals, particularly among the Catholics, is the Eucharist which is the so-called Christian's Prayer and in which certain recitals, supplications and subjects are mentioned.

Among the things existing before in the Eucharist was the cursing of the Jews as the killers of the Holy Christ. When the Jews, the Zionists in particular, succeeded by executing some programs in Europe in acquiring power, the Vatican was forced to decide to officially and legally eliminate this part of the Christian's Prayer and the Eucharist, and in a sense, the Christian authorities issued religious edict that from then on, the Jews should not be cursed during the Eucharist. For a long period, the practice of cursing the Jews had been omitted from the Eucharist but the Christians still used to regard the Jews as the killers of the Holy Christ until such time that in the recent years, as you perhaps are aware of, the Pope ordered the Christians to remove this belief from their minds and hearts, saying that "We want to make peace with the Jews." In the not–so–distant future, the Holy See is supposed to officially visit the Occupied Palestine and meet the Jewish leaders.

Later on, the Christendom observed the same policy in relation to all religions and countries in the world, saying that "We are not at war or in conflict with any religion, sect or country on the grounds of religious beliefs and we accept everybody." Some even went to the extent of acknowledging that Islam is better than Christianity, openly declaring it, but saying that Christianity is a good religion anyway.

The emphasis is then more on peaceful coexistence and avoidance of war and bloodshed on grounds of religious beliefs and sectarian differences, and as indicated earlier, Islam accepts this type of pluralism, i.e. practical pluralism between Islam and other religions of heavenly origin and the People of the Book [ahl al-kitab] and sometimes even those who are not People of the Book and officially recognizing them, and their life, property and chastity like that of the Muslims are honored.

Yet, as also indicted earlier, pluralism is not only practical pluralism and the proponents of this theory usually expand it to include theoretical pluralism, saying that "Not only in practice that we do not fight and wage war against each other but rather theoretically, all religions can be true in principle, and anyone who believes in any of them and faithfully acts upon its ordinances will attain salvation and felicity, and his or her belief and deeds shall be accepted." Of course, as to how all religions might be true and on the truth notwithstanding the contradictions and inconsistencies existing among them, there are various interpretations which we discussed in the previous sessions. From here, I want to proceed to the second part of this session's discussion and it shall be the answer to a question raised in an earlier session.

Founding the Universal Unified Religion

The question is this: What is wrong in saying, "There are commonalities existing among all religions?" We can identify these commonalities and by creating a system among them, we can present the same as a universal unified religion and say that the truth of religion is this common aggregate of all religions and the existing differences among them are of secondary importance and subjective in nature, and their existence or non-existence does not render a blow to the essence of religion. The main trunk of religion is these commonalities and those differences are the twigs and leaves of that tree, and according to his taste and interest, anyone can pick up any of them.

This question is actually the fourth interpretation of religious pluralism from the theoretical dimension and is different from the three interpretations we discussed in the last meeting. At this point, it is necessary to examine it.

An Examination of the Theory of Founding the Universal Unified Religion

In our opinion, this assumption is incoherent in terms of content and text. Besides, there is no evidence to prove it. Technically and scientifically, this assumption is theoretically and practically problematic and unacceptable.

From the practical and substantial aspect of the theory, the problem is that such commonalities cannot be found among the existing religions, or if we can ever arrive at certain commonalities, they will be so ambiguous, general and scanty such that they cannot be regarded as constituting a distinct religion. Let us explain:

Among the existing religions and denominations, we regard the four religions; namely, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, as heavenly religions although we believe that distortions [tahrif] have taken place in Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism, and the existing religions are things other than those revealed by God. Initially, it can be imagined that among these four religions, some commonalities can be extracted. For example, it seems that the principle of believing in God is common among all of them, but after a bit of reflection, it will be clear that it is not so and even with respect to these cases which are seemingly common to all these religions, there are fundamental differences among them. Concerning this very principle of belief in the existence of God which is seemingly a common point among these religions, if we will ponder a little, its opposite will be proved to us.

God who is portrayed in Christianity is "God" that could assume a human form and then be dragged to the cross and be the ransom of the rest of humanity and thus become the atoner of their sins and the source of their salvation and felicity. Christianity describes God in such a manner that God the Father assumed the form of God the Son inside the womb of Saint Mary and was conceived by her, and lived

for some years among His servants and creatures for them to put him in the gallows and He again return to heaven! The God of the Jews2 is perhaps more interesting than this.

Their God is so heavenly that the heaven is His main dwelling place; He also sometimes descends to the earth and takes a walk therein. He also sometimes entertains the idea of engaging in wrestling and fights with Prophet Jacob who overcomes Him and sits on top of His bosom! In short, Prophet Jacob wins over God Who says, "My dear Jacob! Let me go, for it is daybreak and the people will see that you overcome me [and it is embarrassing for me!"] Jacob replies, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." In order to be relieved from the yoke of Jacob, He blesses him and only then does Jacob release Him, and God again returns to heaven!4

From the viewpoint of Islam, God the Exalted is not a body. He neither ascends nor descends. The heaven and earth, yesterday and today make no difference to Him. He is the Creator of time and space and is not restricted by them. He cannot be seen and all creatures are within the realm of His power and are accountable to Him. He neither begets nor is He begotten, and He is free and guiltless of those contemptible and absurd qualities attributed to Him by the Jews and Christians.

It is quite evident that the commonality of these three conceptions of God is only in name and nomenclature for existentially speaking, they are not identical to each other. It is thus like the case of the Persian word, *shir* (which means "milk" and "lion" among others):

That one is shir [lion] in the badiyeh [jungle].

And the other one is shir [milk] in the badiyeh [cup].

That one is shir, which devours human.

And the other one is shir, which human drinks. 5

If *shir* [lion] of the jungle and *shir* [milk] of the breakfast are identical, the God of Islam and that of Christianity and Judaism are also one. Indeed, what is the commonality between the God of Islam and the God of Christianity and Judaism? One says that God is a body, and He ascends and descends. The other one says that He is not a body and He neither ascends nor descends. What is the sum of "He is a body" and "He is not a body"?!

By the way, this is within the parameter wherein we confine the scope of religion to the heavenly religions. But if we go beyond that and take into account whatever is technically regarded today as "religion", the case will be worse than this. One of the ancient religions of the world, which today has so many adherents, is Buddhism. In principle, there is no belief in God in Buddhism. The only thing this religion upholds is that man should be relieved from these worldly and material attachments, entanglements and interests so as to find enlightenment and achieve perfection. It is only in this manner that he will be free from all sufferings and attain absolute happiness and desirable bliss.

What is the commonality between the belief and view of heavenly religions that "There is God" and this belief of Buddhism that "There is no God" that we can deduce and present as the universal unified religion?!

If we go farther and like Auguste Comte (1798–1857) believe in the supremacy of man, again the case will be worse than this. Comte says, "Yes, man wants religion, but not a religion which has God, heavenly prophets, revelation, and metaphysics, but rather a religion in which the Supreme Being is man and the prophet is the intellect. The axis of the universe is man, and the point of direction, object of worship and the object of prostration of everything should be man. The entire universe and the world of being should be in harmony with his desires and inclinations."

Again, we ask: Between the religion in which the object of worship is man and the religion in which the object of worship is the Limitless, Unique and Eternal Being; between the religion in which the object of worship is a limited physical God and is under the yoke of Prophet Jacob; the religion in which the cow is worshipped; the religion in which there is essentially no belief in God which one can take as the universal unified religion?! Given such a condition, to talk about the commonalities of religions and the universal unified religion is more akin to fiction than to reality, and its proponent is closer to a state of drunkenness and imprudence than to a state of intellect and sobriety "Do they not consider? (4:82)"

The first and foremost element of religion is the belief in God, and since in this very first step we encounter all these contradictions, how can we find essential commonalities among religions regard the differences as secondary and proclaim them as constituting the universal unified religion? It is exactly because of the existence of this unsolvable problem that one of the writers inside the country who are inclined to this theory had claimed in one of his recent articles entitled "Dhati va 'Ardhi—ye Din" [The Essential and Secondary Element of Religion] that even belief in God is not an essence and kernel for the religion but is rather one of its secondary elements, and it is possible for a person to have a religion but not believe in God! I say that if God does not exist, naturally there will be no prophet to be sent to the people.

Therefore, the result is that one can deny the existence of God and a prophet, while at the same time professing a religion! Similarly, since it is so evident in matters of belief that we do not have any form of worship which is common to all religions, and for example, it is true that there is prayer in the heavenly religions but its essence is generally different. Thus, neither identical God shall remain nor a prophet nor any form of worship. As such, where are those common elements among all religions in which we will believe as the universal unified religion?!

Presenting the Common Moral Principles as Constituting the Universal Unified Religion

In order to further demonstrate the feebleness and groundlessness of this theory, let us assume that we

accept that although in matters pertaining to God, prophethood and Imamate, we failed to find a common denominator, but we can propose a universal unified religion on the basis of the common moral principles of religions. In other words, one could say that "What I mean by the universal unified religion and the commonalities among religions are a set of moral principles such as the virtue of justice, honesty, and trustworthiness and the vice of injustice, lying and treachery about which all religions are in agreement. The aggregate of the same common moral principles can constitute this universal unified religion which we are dealing. What is wrong with this scheme?

The answer is that firstly, based on this scheme, religion is synonymous with ethics, and to call the set of only some moral principles as religion is an affair contrary to the conventional and common usage of the people and the intellectuals. In all lexicons and dictionaries, religion is different from ethics while ethics is different from religion. There are two distinct terms and expressions for each of them. There is no dictionary of any language in which religion and ethics have identical meaning and connotation. Further proof of this fact is that so many nonreligious people say that they do not profess any religion and sect but at the same time we can see that they believe in and adhere to some moral principles such as the virtue of justice, honesty and trustworthiness and the vice of injustice, lying and treachery.6

In any case, the first problem is that the acceptance of moral principles does not necessarily mean the acceptance of religion and in spite of the acceptance of a set of moral principles, one may not believe in any religion or sect. Secondly, let us assume that belief in God, prophethood and the Judgment Day, and the observance of devotional rites and the like have nothing to do with the essence of religion and that religion is nothing but a set of moral principles.

The next question is this: Is religion only the belief in these moral principles, or in addition to belief, are practices and adherence to these principles also necessary? Is religious the one who defends these principles in books, articles and speeches though having no attachment to them in practice, or are the followers of this universal unified religion those who, apart from words, are also observing and acting upon these principles in the scene of action? If that universal unified religion consists of mere belief devoid of action in those principles, does such a religion have any impact upon the human life? Does its presence or absence make any difference? If words and mere claims were enough, then any oppressor and criminal could have the best articles and speeches in praise of justice, honesty and trustworthiness. Is this the truth about religiosity?!

It is so clear that belief without practice cannot constitute a religion, and definitely, in addition to belief there should also be the seasoning of action and practice so as for us to be able to call a person "religious" on the basis of this terminology. It is here that a very important question arises, and that is: What is the motive of a person who does not believe in God, the Prophet, the divine revelation, the book of account, and reckoning in not telling a lie, and what is the assurance that he would implement justice and not commit treachery?

One of the discussions being held in the recent centuries and which have been supported by some is

this very separation of religion and ethics as well as ethics minus religion. According to this theory, it is said that those which have influence on human life are ethics and moral principles, and that religion has no impact on our life. Therefore, we accept ethics and moral principles which have actual effect, but we have nothing to do with religion. This is the same way of thinking which exists in some people who say that we should be "human" and as to whether we have religion or no religion at all is not that important.

I myself once witnessed right here in Tehran a conversation between two persons in which one said to the other, "So-and-so is a good fellow and he also prays." His friend said in reply, "In my opinion, a person must be good irrespective of whether he prays or not." This way of thinking is actually taken from the same theory of ethics minus religion on the basis of which to be good means observance of moral values; to be good means to be polite, dignified and noble. To have religion or not is not a big deal.

But the truth of the matter is that this theory will lead to nowhere and it is marred with many problems which have been mentioned in detail in the discussions on the philosophy of ethics. For example, one problem is that according to one school of thought on the philosophy of ethics, goodness is synonymous with happiness. That is, anything which makes man happy is good and laudable. Now, keeping in view of this point, assuming that on the philosophy of ethics I uphold that theory and I believe that to be good is equivalent to be enjoyable, and anything that gives more happiness is better.

Now, if in a certain place telling a lie gives me enjoyment, is there any reason for me not to tell a lie? It is evident that according to such a way of thinking, in such a scenario I will certainly tell a lie because my happiness lies in it. If in a certain place to tell the truth will give me discomfort and trouble, to do so is thus not good and there is no reason for me to be honest. Just as in other cases which we regard as moral values, according to this way of thinking, not only are we not obliged to observe them but rather in many cases, it is trampling upon those principles which are considered good, for it brings about happiness and joy. If my happiness is assured by means of stealing, betraying, bribing, and committing crimes, all of these are good. This is the natural result of the hedonistic way of thinking.

Therefore, as to the fact that we regard a set of moral principles acceptable to all as constituting the universal unified religion apart from the fact that such general principles are not certain whether they exist in reality or not the fundamental problem is how to oblige individuals to observe those principles. If there will be no discussion about God, the Day of Resurrection, reckoning, and the book of account, why should we really subject ourselves to these moral principles and let ourselves be restrained by them?

The truth of the matter is that by not considering God and the Day of Resurrection, there will be no motivation to observe these principles and make them obligatory. Yes, of course, possibly, as the effect of inculcation, encouragement, punishment, conditioning, and social customs and mores, a child will be trained in a way that observance of these principles assume the form of a habit for him, but it can no longer be defended as a logical and reasonable theory. In other words, it is true that you have been able to make a person conform to this custom and this code of ethics, but how will you prove that what you are doing is good and logical? Just as by employing inculcation, encouragement and punishment, one

can create and strengthen the custom of telling the truth in a child, by using the same means, one can also teach a child how to tell lies. Is the fact that we have been able to turn lying into a habit for a child a proof that lying is good?

Kant was well aware of the above problems and he understood that if a person did not believe in the existence of reward and punishment for his moral deeds, there would be no guarantee for their implementation. It is because although he believed that moral value and moral good is that we should perform an act with the sole motivation of obeying the dictate of reason and conscience, and if there is hope for reward and recompense, it will become void of moral value. Yet, at the same time, he used to say that if ethics wish to have executive guarantee in actuality and be observed, then we must accept certain principles, which are approximately the same principles we Muslims accept.

Kant used to say, "I can prove right here the existence of God as well as the eternity and perpetuity of the spirit and the soul of man." For, if we do not believe in God who has the Reckoning and the Book of Account and gives reward and punishment, we will have no motivation to do good deeds. In the same manner, if we acknowledge the existence of God but do not believe in the eternity of the spirit and life of man saying that after his death man will be annihilated and if there is any reward and punishment, they will be only related to this world again we will not find much motivation to observe moral principles and values. As such, Kant believed that the existence of God could not be established through theoretical evidence but he said that "Through practical reason, I believe that God must exist so as for ethics not to remain without executive support and assurance."

A Summary of the Critique of the Theory of Universal Unified Religion

In brief, in reply to those who say that by treating the differences among religions as secondary and pertaining to the taste, the commonalities of them all can be taken together and presented as constituting the universal unified religion, we say that firstly, the most rudimentary principles of all religions is God, prophethood and the devotional rites, and through investigation it became clear that in the context of these principles, there is no common point to all religions. Secondly, assuming that we take aside God, apostleship and the devotional rites and accept that the universal unified religion consists of common moral principles acceptable to all religions, the question is: Are you talking about mere belief on these moral principles, or do you regard acting upon them also as a requisite?

If it is mere belief and declaration, it is then evident that mere claim cannot set things right and has no effect on them. If you believe in the necessity of action, the question is: By negating God, apostleship and the Resurrection, what is the guarantee for the implementation and observance of these principles? This is especially true if we take into account that in the philosophy of ethics, there are schools such as hedonism which uphold that moral good is something which gives pleasure to man. How can one who has such a conviction be persuaded to tell the truth that will give him displeasure and pain and be

dissuaded to tell a lie and commit treachery which will be pleasing for him?

The point should not be overlooked that apart from the fact that there are no (absolute) commonalities among religions, if we would not say all religions, at least most of them strongly negate the other faiths' doctrines and campaign against them. Concerning the belief in God, Islam apart from regarding as essential the belief in One God has also made obligatory the negation of polytheism [shirk]. As a matter of fact, it commences with the negation of polytheism and it ends up in monotheism [tawhid]. One should first say, "There is no god..." [La ilaha...] and then, "...except Allah" [illallah]. This means that a Muslim should first negate the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and then affirm the monotheism of Islam. This point makes it problematic first and foremost to find commonalities among religions.

At any rate, the final conclusion is that this hypothesis from both the theoretical perspective and that of the content of the theory is problematic. And practically speaking, there is no proof substantiating it and in our opinion, it is totally unacceptable.

- 1. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers (New York: Harper, 1958). [Trans.]
- 2. That is, God as conceived by the Jews. [Trans.]
- <u>3.</u> For example, see Genesis 11:5: "But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building." In this volume, all biblical quotations are adapted from the New International Version of the Bible (NIV). [Trans.]
- 4. Genesis 32:22-32. [Trans.]
- <u>5.</u> In the last two lines of the poem, with the absence of the Persian post–positional word "ra"—which is common in poems—in either the word shir [milk, or lion] or insan [man], it is not clear which line means "The lion [shir], which devours human," or "The milk [shir], which human drinks." [Trans.]
- <u>6.</u> For example, Dan Barker, a famous atheist, describes himself as "a moral person without beliefs." See Dan Barker and Hassanain Rajabali, A Transcript of Debate on 'Does Not God Exist?' (New York: Islamic Institute of New York, January 5, 2003), http://www.madressa.org/events/Debate2003/Transcript.asp [1], accessed: June 17, 2006. [Trans.]

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