

The Role of Religion in Fostering or Compromising Good Governance and Social Justice.

INTRODUCTION

Man needs to submit to a Will or Cause far bigger than himself. The best of mankind has always been one who has trained himself to apply the brakes to his own mundane private primitive will and live for the Will that is God's or a Bigger Cause.

I remember reading something like this in an interview the late Premier, Mr. Meles Zenawi, had given in the spring of his budding life when he committed to serve a Cause than serve himself. There are people like Martha Mebrhatu who at the tender age of twenty and one ditched all prospects of a bright future that awaits a young pioneering female doctoral candidate of medicine and choose to die for a noble cause to ease the centuries old subjugation of her fellow compatriots.

One of yet another compelling picture that arrests our imagination is the famous photograph of a shy young Palestinian girl hugging an AK 47 and avoiding the camera. That girl is Leila Khalid, one of the firebrands from the seventies and early eighties, who dedicated her young life to serve her unfortunate people.

Indeed a life dedicated to Cause to serve a noble purpose is a worthy one. Even a filthy rich person who has tirelessly taken care of and pursued his selfish private interests suddenly realizes what he is doing and gives up all his meaningless consumer mentality and changes horse in mid stream. One such person is the famous director Tom Shadyk. He gave up all his wealth and kept what a small resource is needed to carry on.

Time Warner's former CEO Ted Turner is another. His other charitable endeavors aside, at one time he donate a billion dollar to the United Nations. I believe the incumbent mayor of New York City takes a dollar as his salary for the exhausting service he renders running the financial heart beat of the entire world.

Man is cast in the image of God and he cannot help but endeavor to live like his creator. Eventually what keeps us going is the pursuit of happiness. If a billion dollar cannot buy you that gratifying sense of living bigger than oneself life is not worth living.

It always makes me wonder. Man spends a fraction of the day feeding himself. For the most part he is taken up in the endless dialogue to make the best of himself and his fellow beings and one of these medium that comes in handy is religion. You see the biblical adage that reads man is not sustained by bread alone is a very deep one. Man is not a consumer by nature. He eats to live but he lives for a higher purpose.

Take a flock of sheep. At any time of the day they are either munching on grass or sleeping the day off. If they serve any 'noble 'purpose it is ending up on the plate of the highest hierarchy on the food chain.

Whether we like it or not irrespective of our declared persuasions, religion has always played a significant role in moderating our selfish interests and in some cases in uprooting it all together. Religion seeds the idea of serving truth and justice without taking in to account our own private interests. Religion seeds the fundamentals of loving an everlasting Idea than submit to the immediate short lived needs of the flesh.

That is where the deeply religious John Brown and the communist Che Guevara converge. The lives of both these firebrands are dedicated to and lost to a Cause far bigger than them. That is why after more than a century and half we remember the martyrdom of John Brown with tears in our eyes. That is why we observed more than a minute of silence when Che Guevara's remains were dug up by a team of Cuban forensic experts and bits and pieces the remains began to surface.

It is simply because they died for the common good of the human race serving humanity by dedicating their lives to the undying values of truth and justice. That is why we mourn them centuries later after they were

martyred. That is a basic human value that is true in all times in all places. That is the driving force behind all the international covenants of human rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

These values are color blind, non age and sex specific; they are true in almost all societies and religions. So much so that, we suffer the injustice inflicted on a defenseless Indian medical student riding a bus home by a rowdy gangs of outlaws and the subsequent indifference of the authorities.

It all comes down to what the revered Doctor Martin Luther King said, 'Injustice any where is a threat to justice everywhere.'

THE DOMAIN OF RELIGION

A few days ago Aljazeera English had Richard Dawkins, the Kenyan born professor of the humanities at the prestigious Oxford University. Topic for discussion-Is there God? Does religion serve humanity or is it doing a disservice? Would mankind be better off without religion and lead a contented happy life? His answer eventually reminded me a Hollywood comedy entitled 'Definitely, may be!' The moderator was this fresh inductee into the ranks of Aljazeera's young blood whom we used to know as a guest speaker on culture coated religious discourse. He was relishing the topic very much for the wrong reason one might argue.

He quoted with undisguised pleasure from the book of the professor '...the old Testament God is fratricidal, vengeful, phobic megalomaniac...' bla, bla. The unabashed name calling seems to be the only thing that marks out the professor from other agnostics and so called atheists. The only thing that makes him stand out is his arrogance and 'gut' to stand up to the rest of human race.

All the time I was wondering 'but the professor seems to be dead certain about the existence of God and that he hates Him and is very much angry with him. Otherwise, how could a man be so much angry with and disappointed in a Void? Not to mention makes a living out of a it?'

By his own account he spends most of his time worrying himself sick about God and Religion. He writes books, gives seminars, organizes a band of zealot agnostics...He has dedicated his energy, time and mental faculties to God. He keeps God ever alive. He is in a roundabout way a man of God. So are all these armies of so called agnostics, who couldn't do without the idea of God.

I mentioned Professor Dawkins just because he is the ideal and most popular contemporary representative of this group of people who say they don't believe in God or Religion yet spend most of their time speaking, reading, researching, writing and dedicating their precious lives to keep the idea of God and religion ever fresh and alive in our minds. In a way they are serving God as much as the faithful do if not more.

In the most disturbing passage of the Karamazov Brothers, old Fyodor Pavlovitch holds one of his philosophical discourses with his boys and the lackey, Smredyakov-topic of discussion? Just like the one hosted by Aljazeera English. Is there God, what purpose does religion serve? The atheist Ivan says absolutely no...but read 'definitely, may be'. Alexei says yes and the old man who tends to agree with the older son wants to know, 'Most probably it is Vanya who is telling the truth but if there is no God who is playing this joke with us?' Ivan says May be it is the devil. If indeed there is a devil there is a God. In another passage, the oldest of the Karamazov Brothers, Dmitri on his part takes up the issue with another atheist who believes in social justice.

Mitya wasn't persuaded he argued strongly that without God, man would double the price of bread, fleece the poor of its last dinner, and ends up killing his brother for his money without being slightly troubled in his conscience. In a way he says, social justice without the idea of God is unimaginable.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

Good governance is much talked about. Every government pledges to deliver it. Good governance is wider than rule of law or democracy and of course much looser and its emphasis might be on procedural rights than substantive ones. That is basically what makes it applicable as much to the bleak hereditary communist dictatorship of North Korea as to the French Republic.

Speaking for Social Justice and against the dictates of neo liberalism the celebrated Chinese dissident and author has this to say on the subject:

It could be argued that the promise of Democracy, the search for good governance, and the professionalization of economic activism are an integral part of the depoliticizing force of neo liberalization. From this perspective, the work of the Southern Andean Church could very well be seen as encouraging compliance with the rolling out of neo liberalism.

That may partly account for the lack of any definite precise meaning rendered to the phrase. The concept tries to tie up governance which is the antithesis of chaos with justice. To govern is to reign in chaos and disorder, it implies subjugation, it connotes bending the unruly or so understood will and conduct of individuals and groups but it is not shouldn't be exploited to help seed injustice and violations of group or individual rights hence the need to conduct it with a fair measure of goodness.

Good governance implies executing the laws with their primary spirit. After all it is the age old teaching of legal scholars to commend to read the law with its spirit. Question is whence does this spirit come from?

Before a law is given, it is borne in the minds of people, in most instances than not it is driven and prompted by the need to serve a noble purpose. That is why the Preambles of almost all laws issued under all circumstances are such a delight to read.

We may contend that this spirit of the laws emanate from the so called Secular Ethical philosophies of ancient Greeks or those of the Renaissance. Question is whence did those secular ethical philosophers had the idea? Aren't these ideas in large measure attributed to the gods at Mount Olympus or the God of Abraham? Let us not forget that the bleak view of Hobbes as regard to the human life in its state of nature having the propensity to be, "Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," and that it is "a war of all against all." isn't without some grain of truth. Whatever authority we chose to ascribe to we cannot deny the fact that we are always striving to be our better selves and that we are born or nurtured by nature in to an expansive knowledge of the good and the evil.

The central characteristics of social justice are the concepts of equality and solidarity. A Wikipedia definition maintains that the concept of social justice encompasses the idea of faith in human right and human dignity. Just like good governance it is loose and liable for multiple applications. The International Labor Organization, the Vienna Declaration e t c according to Wikipedia, explicitly relates social justice to human rights and in the former case to peace. The causes of social justice and good governance are mostly espoused by religious organizations as one could easily learn from googling the concepts on the internet or by reading books written on the subjects. As a matter of fact the causes of social justice had been the exclusive domain of religious organizations until the second half of the twenty century.

The fact that the concepts are capable of entertaining dissimilar application as befits different societies made them equally applicable to a Hindu community as well as to a Christian one. What is more following its being embraced by secular political and economic organization the concept got prominence among such institutions as the different organizations and agencies of the United Nations and political; parties like the Green Party and parties of leftist orientations.

THORNY ISSUES AND THE QUESTION OF MULTICULTURALISM.

Then one may argue as indeed done by professor Dawkins, that religion has always been at the centre of all sorts of strife concocted by the human race over the centuries.

Religion thrives in an atmosphere of absolutism and the latter attracts die hard zealots who declare 'either you are with me or against me.' How can a religious community embrace others who are not of their kind unless they are lying in wait until the opportune moment strikes and then wipe them out their presumed opponents? Can we say a bunch of proselytes living with native infidels as one of themselves while working hard to convert them as being a tolerant multi cultural community who is reaching to those who are quite unlike them ? I don't think so. Was President Bush justified to declare you are either with me or against me? Yes! Was he right to say that on National Television, No.

Because he had white washed all those accommodating sheds of grey where we could possibly reach out for one another across aisles. The question is when we talk about social justice and good governance as well as the role our religious persuasions' play in it, are we asking the faithful to be false to their respective religion or are we saying in their fundamentals they originated in the noble hearts and minds of the best of humanity and that we disagree only on matters of technicality.

The al Shebab zealots who bulldoze burial grounds of Islamic scholars and Saints could equally be said as rude imbecile ignorant unruly bands of outlaws who desecrate holy site or lauded as a committed faithful firebrands who are in the service of God without the selfish motives to accommodate infidels just to eat good and live long. In this context we could fairly argue that there is neither good governance nor any social justice in ecclesiastical courts. Because that is the governance wing of the al Shabab net works of warrior proselytes cum governance officers of the Sharia.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky is incredibly taken up in the huge vortex of the questions of and role of religion in bringing about social justice and good governance. One would think he is a devoted student of judicial divinity. One has only to call to mind Ivan Karamazov's article about the Jurisdiction of Ecclesiastical Courts. If he were a 21th Century Muslim at the University of Al Azhar, he could truly pass for an al shebab zealot. He denounces the Holy See as being in the service of mankind and not that of God and advocates for all judicial jurisdictions to pass from secular organs to the true Church. There he believed God's true justice is dispensed. Ultra Monasticism? Depends on who we are, for him justice is best served by people of God who are not affiliated to any interests of the flesh.

CONSTITUTIONAL GROUNDS

On another extreme, how could we possibly tie up religion which works very hard, to filter out the mass and select a few to have a role in a democracy of the majority? Is it even remotely possible to expect any measure of good governance from an institution that thrives on being selective to do justice to all being blind folded?

The Statute of Justice is not depicted in blind folds for nothing. It purports to be indiscriminate. It is not allowed to sneak a peep to know the supplicant. But religion is bent on extorting a confession from the faithful, it plods the community to come out clean and declare if they are for or against God. So, is it possible to expend good governance across the board in a society where religion is given any role to play in dispensing justice?

To be more precise, in the sphere of social justice and good governance, is religion a threat to be contained or a virtue to be promoted and celebrated.

For the proponents of the incompatibility of religion and state, the very question sounds most preposterous. They strongly contend that Constitutional history has made it abundantly clear that the better religion is kept out of governance the better. They even go much further than ...in the line of the teachings of Thomas Moore and Hobbes ...that in the state of nature man is not to be trusted with his being noble nor is he dependable to carry out his official duty with justice if he is left to have a free reign tapping in to his religious faith to dispense good governance.

On questions of religion the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Constitution is unequivocal to the effect that the dominion of State should be left to the State and that of religion to the faithful. It reads,

Article 27

'Freedom of Religion, Belief and Opinion'

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include the freedom to hold or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and the freedom, either individually or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
2. Without prejudice to the provisions of sub-Article 2 of Article 90, believers may establish institutions of religious education and administration in order to propagate and organize their religion.
3. No one shall be subject to coercion or other means which would restrict or prevent his freedom to hold a belief of his choice.
4. Parents and legal guardians have the right to bring up their children ensuring their religious and moral education in conformity with their own convictions
5. Freedom to express or manifest one's religion or belief may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, peace, health, education, public morality or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others, and to ensure the independence of the state from religion.

With these corner stone percepts, are we courting danger when we allow ourselves such liberty as to encourage organized religious groups to have a hand in governance, a good one at that?

In a concept paper entitled Constitution and State in the Domain of Religion, Dr. Fasil Nahom cautiously implies that the FDRE Constitution indeed encourages religious communities to work with the state for the good of the society, and that the Constitution not only respects religion and that it tends to it with maximum care and concern.

According to Dr. Fasil Nahom religion according to the FDRE Constitutions doesn't play a minimalist role in keeping organized religious apart and safe, it rather commends them to come together converge on the commonalties and serve the common good of the whole society.

CONCLUSION

Whether we are practicing religious people or otherwise, we cannot deny the fact that our upbringing is influenced by the fundamental values espoused by religion. These values among other promote good governance and social justices. What is more this is the characteristics feature of most religions that it makes one wonder if the primarily source of all religions is one and the same except being told in different styles , particularly as regards the virtues of good governance and social justices.

Even proponents of the secular dimension of the concepts cannot deny the fact that they are the new comers on the scene and not the concept and those values had their origin in religious environment.

The reason they are conducive to a religious motive is they are fundamentally associated with procedural rights and the general common understanding we all share. These understanding are so common and basic that even a child understands when he is denied a hearing. He knows what is fair and just. The simplicity of

the concepts is what keeps them common to all humanity and away from technicality ridden domains of the official justice, economics and political systems of administrations.

That is why they are most sought after when society is in a state of crisis. Like the economic meltdown in Europe and the role the Churches are playing literally taking the place of government and sustaining the society. It isn't because they are ordered by a Court or duty bound by law. It emanated from values and faiths we have developed.

Thus the first thing we should underline is social justice and good governance are the spirits of the laws and not so much the letter of the law. Secondly more than any other organized communities of people religion has played most significant role in sustaining propagating and promoting the said values. And thus they are the most conducive forums in some instances to serve the purposes.

The concepts are so much intertwined with humanity that they are equally true to all societies, the faithful and otherwise. No matter how strongly they deny it, even the unbelievers cannot deny the role of religion in keeping and actively promoting the ideals and that in one way or another our upbringing in religious environment has helped all of us to believe in the values.

Having said that, one would be deluding himself if he ignores the other face of the coin, as much as religion is serving the noble purpose mentioned above it is equally the breeding ground of social injustice and bad governance.

Ethiopia is lauded as the best example of a religiously tolerant society. The very term 'tolerant' suggests the fact that under normal circumstances a religious society is intolerant.

I believe that is one of the reasons that prompted a Scholar of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to write a thought provoking book on the subject. The book is entitled 'Is there Religious Tolerance in Ethiopia?' and goes on to question and document numerous instance proving the contrary.

Thus it all depends on how we entertain the 'role' of religion. We can capitalize on it to build a just society by importing developed religious values of social justice and good governance in to the mainstream or suffer the bad consequences.

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