In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind

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Is Modernity in Conflict with Religion?

The fact is that today our impression is unlike the attitude of our forefathers. If we stare at the starry sky above our head, although, the same light will be reflected in our eyes, which are with the same structure and the stars with the same shape, still we will not think the same as them. Of course, we will no more interpret the sky as a ceiling or stars as light. It is not that somebody has taught us; however, our attitude has been changed with the passage of time.

Willy-nilly, we live in the age of modernity and therefore we are called modern, however, the level of modernity varies from one society to the other. In addition, we are still religious and one will be hardly found to follow no religion. A question arises that isn't religiosity/spirituality contrary to modernity? Moreover, currently our world is in the process of higher modernization, Can we adopt any type of attitude towards religion?

Well, the people belong to modern age cannot approach religion traditionally. Hence, such individuals are left with only two choices ahead. Whether to fully abandon religion, in such a case they will be deprived of the priorities that a religion carries with and will feel a spiritual vacuum, or to adopt religion in a modern way – let us call this new approach spirituality. The positive function of the religion throughout the history can not be denies, but persistence is that today we need spirituality rather than traditional understanding of the historical religion. In other words, we should approach religion in a way not to be in conflict with the avoidable, but true, and unavoidable elements of modernity. One of the major elements of modernity is rationality, and spirituality should be in accord with it. One can also say that spirituality means a rationalized religion not a traditionalized one.

Moreover in modern life, people prefer autonomy to heteronomy. Of course, one likes to decide by his own and abhor being submissive. Hegel believed that whoever be heteronymous s/he will be alienated. Hence, accepting every word with blind eyes will lead to heteronomy.

Secularization is the next element of the modern world. People would like to see the outcome and advantages of an action in the same world. To explain further, religion is supposed to respond the needs of the mundane life rather than attributing each and every result of an action in the next world. Today people expect religion to satisfy their spiritual needs, pacify them, fill them with hope and happiness, give them peace of mind and change their life for better. Dr. Shariati, an Islamic intellectual, says that if a religion does not benefit in the world it will be of no use in the hereafter.

Egalitarianism is also one of the basic elements of modernity. Sanctifying one is no more in use in modern life and everyone is equal in the eye of modernity. The last characteristic, as modern societies know, is that there are some relationships between religions and their localities. In any religions a set of particular doctrine exists because of their emergence in a particularly historical period, geographical area and especial culture. For example, in Holy Qur'an people are asked to consider "camel" for pondering over the amazement of creation. Camel is used because it was one of the most usual animals in Arab Peninsula. However, in Buddha "elephant" is used to portray things, for the emergence of this religion in India. Moreover, Holy Qur'an describes the beauty of heavenly nymphs (Hoor) as having big and black eyes, it is because such a girl was known beautiful among the Arab men. However, a Japanese poet likens his love's eyes to the eyes of a hen and therefore feeling proud whereas an Arab poet smolders restlessly for his love's eyes are as big as the eyes of a cow! Hence, such portrayals are due to the locality of a religion. So to obtain spirituality, the locality of religions is supposed to be put aside. Of course, locality will be changed into universality in our age.

In addition, contemporary people believe that religions have emerged to serve human beings, meet their needs and change their lives for better. Thus, we should use religion to obtain a prosperous life and we are not to serve religion. Rudolf Karl Bultmann (1884 – 1976), a German theologian, talks of demythologization in modern world. He believes that some myths have been combined with religions which are in contrary with rationality. Bultmann persists that the mythical issues should be interpreted in a way so as to be acceptable for the contemporary men.

For clarification, Bultmann cited the first-century view of the universe in which people thought that the earth was a sphere, with heaven above and hell beneath; in this sense it formed a "three-tiered" universe. He explained that people of that time used this mythical view of the universe to explain the divine in human terms.

Karl Marx was also talking of demystification. He believed that in the past people lived in a mysterious world and now we are supposed to demystify it. Anyhow, it was not all that was talking about modernity and there are left many things to be said. It can be concluded that modernity does not necessarily threaten our religious beliefs especially if we manage to adopt a new approach and gain spirituality which is not contrary to any religion.

Defining Democracy

By Dilawar Sharzai

The basic question about a democratic system is that whether it protects the liberty and rights of the people as whole or it protects the liberty of every individual. Does it let the individuals be sacrificed for the mass or mass for the individuals? Or, otherwise, it protects both the liberty of the individual and the mass at the same time? It is generally believed about the democracy that it is 'government of the people, for the people and by the people'- as suggested by Abraham Lincoln. This has become one of the most dominant definitions of democracy and commonly referred to by many while defining democracy. This particular definition as soon as read or quoted gives the impression that democracy is a system that keeps in consideration the people as a whole. At the same time it does not have any term or word related to individual liberty that has been talked about so much in modern political discussions. Does it imply that democracy tends to sacrifice individual for the mass?

When it is said that 'democracy is the government of the people, for the people and by the people', it does entail that democracy tends to keep in consideration the 'general will' to a dominant extent. General will here tends to refer to the desire or interest of the people as whole. The term 'general will' has to be understood, so as to understand the definition in consideration. This term – general will – was introduced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a well-known political thinker and philosopher, whose ideas had great impacts on French Revolution. Rousseau was basically one of the dominant philosophers who believed in the 'Contract Theory', which suggested that states came into being as a result of contract among the people. Rousseau believed that the contract among the people took place so as to safeguard the rights and liberty of the people as whole (though this particular reference to the 'Contract Theory' is so short and insufficient but strives to give the basic idea of the concept). Rousseau believed, "As long as several men assembled together consider themselves as a single body, they have only one will which is directed towards their common preservation and general well-being. Then, all the animating forces of the state are vigorous and simple, and its principles are clear and luminous; it has no incompatible or conflicting interests; the common good makes itself so manifestly evident that only common sense is needed to discern it. Peace, unity and equality are the enemies of political sophistication. Upright and simple men are difficult to deceive precisely because of their simplicity; stratagems and clever arguments do not prevail upon them, they are not indeed subtle enough to be dupes. When we see among the happiest people in the world bands of peasants regulating the affairs of state under an oak tree, and always acting wisely, can we help feeling a certain contempt for the refinements of other nations, which employ so much skill and effort to make themselves at once illustrious and wretched?"

The term 'general will' as used by Rousseau has been very much controversial and at times very obscure. Some of the political thinkers have even considered it nothing more than 'dictatorship of the proletariat' or 'the tyranny of the urban poor' as Rousseau believed that the concept of personal property was responsible for bringing disorder in human society, which is much like communistic criticism of personal property. But, in real sense Rousseau did not consider it to be so. Moreover, after too much criticism of this concept to be against the individual liberty, Rousseau in his later interpretations of the concept tried to add further characteristics to it. He even suggested that the individual liberty and rights were guaranteed only when they were seen in perspective of collective life. No liberty for an individual could prove beneficial if it violated the rights of the people as whole.

An important drawback or deficiency that really exists in the concept of 'general will' is its obscure and ambiguous nature. It is difficult to find where the general will exists and it is also too difficult to gauge it. Further, it tends to make people think more of mass than individual, thus making an attempt to sacrifice individual for the state – making the system more totalitarian. Therefore, suggesting that democracy tends to safeguard the 'general will' will definitely underestimate the characteristic of democracy, which strives to guarantee individual liberty to a great extent. In this regard, only the definition 'government of the by people, for the people and by the people' do not sufficiently depict democracy. Moreover if democracy protects the 'general will' alone, what about the individuals, groups and communities that do not agree with it? It is common to observe the minority groups and communities in a state, that do not agree with the will of the people as whole and even most of the times tend to oppose them. Should not democracy protect their rights as well? I think democracy, as being practiced by different states in modern world does strive to a large extent to protect the rights of all the individuals and minority groups, even if it stands against the 'general will'. If democracy is to protect only the rights and the will of the majority, it is bound to be exploitative. Further, it, in that sense, also tends to neglect the diversity in different states of the world. It is appreciative to note that some of the developed nations of the world have been able to shield the rights of the minority groups and tackle the diversity in their states through proportional representation, local governments and appropriate federal forms of government. The other states of the world that are in the basic stages of their democratic setup and also have to carry diverse societies, like that of our country Afghanistan, have to keep such examples in their considerations so as to avoid any sort of discrimination and guarantee true representation to all the people of the world; as democracy is not just about making all the people form a 'general will' (as is strived by totalitarian regimes) and protect it. It is about managing the diversities in the people and making them believe that they have their rights are protected and they have their say in the formation and regulation of state affairs.

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The Evolution of the Refugee Crisis

The 2015 refugee crisis is still a raw issue for millions of Europeans, and continues to serve as fodder for populist and nationalist movements. But, in reality, the situation has started to improve dramatically in many host countries, and it is now incumbent on European leaders to ensure that the trend continues.

By Erik Berglöf

As they celebrate Christmas, Germans are also remembering the dead from last year's attack on a Berlin Christmas market by a migrant who had been denied asylum. That incident fanned the flames of public sentiment against immigration, and probably played a role in Chancellor Angela Merkel's stunning failure to form a new a coalition government after the federal election in September. Within the German electorate, there are widespread fears that another wave of migrants like the influx two years ago will deluge the country.

But the facts on the ground have changed dramatically. On November 15, 2015, a migration command center in the German Foreign Ministry on Werderscher Markt in Berlin was tracking refugee flows at every potential border crossing on the route from Greece to Germany. Eventually, of 12 million displaced Syrians, one million arrived in Europe. And despite a massive response from the German government and members of the public, many asylum-seekers ended up sleeping on the streets and in railway stations. At the time, there were rumors of a migrant-fueled crime wave sweeping the country, though later research found little increase in crime along migration routes. Two year later, much has changed. The German bureaucratic engine has been firing on all cylinders to process asylum claims and facilitate integration. Of 700,000 asylum applications in 2016, almost 300,000 were denied, and those people are waiting to be returned to their countries of origin. Greece, the first stop in the European Union for refugees from the Middle East, has started to close some refugee camps, after granting asylum to around 50,000 people. And even Italy, the first EU port of call for African migrants, is now experiencing a decline in asylum applications. Turkey, meanwhile, has stuck to its deal with the EU, whereby it receives financial aid in exchange for taking in Syrian refugees. Before the deal entered into effect in March 2016, Turkey's government had been actively encouraging migrants and refugees to continue to Europe; now, it is integrating refugees into Turkish society, and even trying to prevent high-skilled migrants from leaving. Accordingly, the European Commission announced this month that it would provide another €700 million ($830 million) in aid to Turkey. The situation has also improved in Northern Iraq (Iraqi Kurdistan). Previously, the Syrian civil war and the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) had displaced three million Iraqis and hundreds of thousands of Syrian Kurds. But now that ISIS has been defeated militarily and its territory reclaimed, refugee Kurds have a choice of either staying in Iraq or returning to Syria. Internally displaced Iraqis, on the other hand, are expected to return to whatever remains of their cities and homes – a process that has been accelerated by the Iraqi Kurds' renewed push for independence this year. Against this backdrop of relatively improved conditions, Lebanon stands out as an exception. Although Lebanon has a population of just four million people, it is now host to more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees. The result is a growing sense of refugee fatigue, which is threatening to destabilize the country's fragile multi-confessional power-sharing arrangement. Already, the government's rhetoric has started to focus on returning refugees to Syria, rather than on determining how best to provide for them.

As for the refugees themselves, many are visible in the streets of Beirut, the capital, but most are stuck in camps or temporary host communities, and lack adequate access to health care and schooling. And even when refugees are accommodated by schools and universities, they have limited employment prospects after graduating. Another lost generation is coming of age in a country that has long been riven by bungled integration efforts. Making matters worse, following the resignation and return of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Lebanon is now experiencing a political crisis that has raised the specter of a return to civil war. So, what can be done? Neighboring Jordan may offer one model to follow. Rather than integrating refugees, Jordan has until recently kept them largely confined along the Syrian border. At first, this left refugees with little access to education or labor markets. But, thanks to concerted efforts by the international community and funding from the EU, there are now several programs in place to stimulate investment, encourage companies to hire refugees, and create special economic zones on the border. The idea is that by spurring economic activity on the border, Syrian refugee communities and businesses can start to develop the capacity needed to rebuild post-war Syria when the time comes. It is too soon to evaluate the full impact of these measures, but they are promising nonetheless.

But Europe, for its part, must do far more than provide funding. The failure of European governments to manage the sudden influx of refugees in 2015 has fueled populism and intolerance in previously open societies. True, this failure was partly due to genuine constraints, particularly in health-care and education systems. But it also reflected poor preparation, a lack of coordination, and insufficient investment. The refugee crisis is fundamentally a systemic challenge, because developments in one country can affect many other countries. As such, the crisis demands an EU-level and, indeed, a global response. Fortunately, for the first time since Syria's civil war began, there is hope that the EU might muster an effective joint approach to the problem. In a wide-ranging speech at the Sorbonne in September, French President Emmanuel Macron injected new energy into EU policymaking in this area. And, inspired by the Jordanian model, EU policymakers can now begin to develop a more coherent, evidence-based migration policy. Of course, much will depend on Germany. One hopes that its leaders will not let whipped-up sentiments about migration torpedo a coalition agreement. They must recognize that German leadership in the EU and on the world stage is crucial for managing the migration challenge, not least in Germany itself. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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