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introduction

Religious Ferment in Asia

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For even the casual observer of the world today there are certain obvious generalizations that can be made about our subject—Religious Ferment in Asia. For a group of scholars—people who are anything but casual about the matter—there is an awareness of the danger of generalizations, a well-founded skepticism of them, and yet, I would think, an appreciation of the part that well-informed generalizations can play in the scholarly endeavor to comprehend a vast and complex subject. Formulations of the generalizations and the attempt to justify them by concrete examples, criticism of them and citation of exceptions, or, more devastatingly, reference to strongly contradictory facts or trends and therefore a resulting direct attack upon the broad statements that we are all prone to make—all of these taken together are integral parts of the attempt to gain a disciplined understanding.

Even in the matter of the words "Religious Ferment," the theme of this collection, we should devote attention to just what we mean to convey by these words. When we speak of "the religious" in reference to Asia, do we mean what is now so often referred to as the amalgam of the great and little traditions of a particular cultural-social area of Asia? By the word "religious" are we focusing attention upon the seminal themes inherent to the philosophical-theological *Weltanschauung* together with the folk cult as the two mingle in a relationship that often appears ambiguous and even contradictory to the essential nature of each? And what about the norms of the social structure, the idealized ways of behavior, and the custom moralities: Are

Diacritical marks have not been used consistently by the several contributors; and they have not been used in some Sanskrit words because the printer did not have them.

these included in our term in a deliberate meaningful manner; are they merely assumed to be included without specific attention being paid to them; or, perhaps, are they excluded because our particular theoretical definition of the religious and our resulting methodology consider them at most to be peripheral to our concern?

There would appear to be little problem with the word "ferment" and what we mean by it. Certainly the cultures and the societies of the nation states of Asia are in ferment along with most if not all of the rest of the world, and perhaps more so. That is to say the obvious: namely, that they are agitated by the conditions of their surroundings and are excited by the events of this time in their history.

However, when we put the two words together, when we qualify "ferment" by the adjective "religious," a new and not so demonstrable generalization is suggested. Are the traditional religions associated with the cultures and societies of Asia agitated? Are they excited? If so, to what degree and why; if not, how are they accurately described? And, in either case—in ferment or not—what is their present role or roles in the ferment that we probably agree surrounds them today? Are they conservative forces fighting a losing battle in defense of the traditional values of the particular area; are they enlightened and adaptive preservers of past riches, seeking to incorporate that wealth into newly emerging modes and structures; or are they merely passive observers of the ferment that surrounds them?

Quite by accident, recently I read or reread in just the space of a few hours one morning the following assessments of three leading Asian religions. In his autobiography, Bertrand Russell reprinted an article that he wrote during his tour of China in 1920, in which he said: "Chinese religion is curiously cheerful. When one arrives at a temple, they give one a cigarette and a cup of delicately fragrant tea. . . . Buddhism, which one thinks of as ascetic, is here quite gay. The saints have fat stomachs, and are depicted as people who thoroughly enjoy life. No one seems to believe the religion, not even the priests."¹ I am certain that there are many Asian scholars who, while not being able to get into China, have had similar experiences in Japan in recent years and would have been tempted to write about Buddhism in Japan as Russell did about it in China, if they had not plumbed deeper into the religious situation of Japan.

Or, coming closer to the present, in 1961, while in prison

under sentence of death, Mohammad Fadhel Jamali, former foreign minister and prime minister of Iraq, wrote a series of letters to his son concerning Islamic faith and practice. To quote just a brief passage: "The Islamic society, then, is retarded in understanding the Islamic creed, in performing Islamic duties, in following Islamic legislation, and in practising sublime Islamic morality. The reason for this goes back to defects in general and public education, defects in the home, the school, the men of religion, the leaders and guides—all are responsible for the true Islamic education of Moslems, but they have mostly failed in their duties."² Here also, I am sure, there are many of us who on the basis of first-hand experience and serious study would give a similar estimate of the Muslim situation.

Or, even more recently, speaking about India and Hinduism, the eminent Hindu scholar R. N. Dandekar said: "Today, India, like the rest of the world, is witnessing a major conflict of values. In India, as elsewhere, there is a distinct shift of interest. . . . In the matter of religion, the Hindus have now generally become listless. They are merely drifting. . . . The first and foremost requisite in this connection is to banish the prevailing atmosphere of frustration and cynicism."³ Again, as is the case in Buddhist and Muslim areas of Asia, all who know Hinduism well are aware of the listless and drifting aspects of contemporary Hinduism to which Dandekar refers.

But of course we cannot simply stop at this point. We cannot trust the easily made generalization of a foreign lay observer made decades ago about Buddhism in China. And despite our respect for their first-hand insights, we cannot and must not isolate the negative remarks of leading adherents of the major religions of the Asian world and thereby ignore the main thrust of their statements of faith in the enduring values of their traditional religions. The situation is changing too rapidly for us to depend upon anything but the latest information, and strongly negative or positive judgments must be weighed carefully in light of the many exceptions that may very well prove to be the rule rather than the broader judgments with which those exceptions are not in accord.

To cite but one example, again in regard to Buddhism and by a better-informed layman than Lord Russell, Jerrold Schecter, writing in 1967, said:

Buddhism in Asia is basic belief and bedrock identity; it influences power, sex, psychology and economics.

Buddhism is not only religion and philosophy; it is also nationalism and ideology, it is the ultimate source of Asian values.

. . . today in the Buddhist countries of Asia, the alms bowl has been overturned. The peaceful path of the Middle Way has been twisted into the new violence of street demonstrations with the blare of loudspeakers, the hollow crack of wooden clubs on skulls and the maddening fury of tear gas. Buddhism in Asia is a faith in flames.⁴

If this characterization by a journalist is correct about Buddhism at the beginning of the last third of the twentieth century, something of a drastic nature has happened in the past fifty years, or Max Weber was in error when he wrote that "to change the social order in this world neither early nor later Buddhism has attempted to do."⁶ Careful reflection, I believe, will lead us to the conclusion that something of a drastic nature has happened in the past half century and, also, that Weber was not wholly correct in his sweeping generalization.

I submit two more random observations about religion in Asia before proceeding on to what I hope is a more structured approach to our concern. One is a statement by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his *Islam in Modern History*. In discussing Pakistan as an Islamic state and the problem of modernity, he suggests that "one might almost argue that the fundamental religious problem for contemporary Muslims has to do with the fact that the impact of modernity upon the Islamic tradition has not been nearly strong enough."⁵

And, finally, Richard C. Bush, in his highly regarded paper "The Impact of Communism on Religions in China," comes to the conclusion that the "result is a quiet, contained existence [of the religions] with little possibility for [their] growth or development."⁷

Now, what are we to do about the wide variety and frequent disparity of statements about our subject on the part of scholars and investigators and of indigenous participants whose opinions we respect? Obviously, we need to recognize what the disparity tells us, namely, that the situation is different in the instance of each religion, though there are analogous forces at work and, frequently, similar reactions to those forces. Further, in the instance of each religious area the standards for assessment and

evaluation of the nature and degree of ferment vary as a result of the specific relationship of many factors, both historic and contemporary; also, the conditions to be assessed vary from area to area and from stratum to stratum within any one religious tradition. We need only to mention the differing norms and methods of approach employed by the investigator and the part they inevitably play in forming his particular conclusions.

Having in mind such complexities in treating the subject, I will focus attention upon India and Hinduism with the purpose of suggesting some aspects of religious ferment in that area and, perhaps, adumbrating also analogous situations in other religious areas of the Asian world.

One predominant and striking feature of the religious situation in many parts of Asia today is the expression in political forms of the idealized religious values of the past. From the proclamation if not the actualization of a Muslim state in Pakistan to the intense expression of Nichiren Japanese Buddhism in the form of Sōka Gakkai, traditional aspects of religious thought and practice are being brought before the public mind as constituting the ideal standards for personal and corporate life within the modern state.

In India and for Hinduism this has taken the form of what is perhaps best described as a conservative religious and cultural idealism, grounded in an idealized past. This idealism seeks to express itself meaningfully by entering into the political arena through a political party or arm that receives much of its strength from its ties to a so-called cultural organization that devotes its energies primarily to inculcating youth with a knowledge of and zeal for that past. The glorious past and its accomplishments are not only declared to be the proper standards for the present; they also furnish the divinely ordained key to the successful incorporation of modernity into the social structure and moral fiber of the contemporary nation-state. It is not the "modern"—whatever is meant by that term—that sets the norm and to which adjustment must be made. Rather, it is the traditional truth that gives the divine dharma, the cosmic law, to which all that is new or apparently different must be adjusted.

We are, of course, familiar with the Hindu renaissance and revival of the nineteenth century. One primary feature of that new self-consciousness was the conviction, closely associated with Swami Dayānand Saraswati and the Arya Samāj, that in

the Vedas of early Aryan India are deposited the fundamental truths applicable to mankind at any time. The *Sanātanadharma*, the eternal religion, must be reinstated among the Hindu-Indian people, and in that reinstatement will be their salvation, not only religiously but culturally, socially, and politically.

In the present century there have been a few principal groups that have built upon this conviction in various ways as they have attempted to bring their idealized religious values of the past into meaningful viability in the present. The Hindu Mahāsabhā and one of its early leaders, V. D. Savarkar, played an important part in putting forth an amalgam of traditional Hindu philosophy-theology, Indian-Hindu culture, and the custom morality associated with folk India and its traditions. Savarkar's *Hindutva*, or "Hinduness," was meant to convey all aspects of Hindu thought and ways of life as they were believed by him and his colleagues to have been followed in the days of India's glory. By placing emphasis upon what he held to be the property of all Indians in the twentieth century—namely, a common culture, a common history, a common classical language, a common country, and a common religion—Savarkar formalized the thought that has been at the foundation of the prominent examples of Hinduism in politics in India during recent decades. Hinduness includes all who are the natural-born inheritors of the seminal themes of classical Indian philosophy-theology; all who are surrounded by and participants in the broad, amorphous folk religion; and all who have received the cultural and social inheritance that distinguishes the Indian from other people. All who have received the gift of these values are bound together within the Hindu Sangathan. They are brothers within the Hindu community as a result of their Hinduness, which makes them unique among the world's peoples. And it is upon this basis, and this basis only, that the Hindu Rāshtra, the Hindu nation, can come into its own in the modern day.

Today two groups, one primarily cultural and the other political, are seeking by all possible means to rally the Indian people around the concept of Hinduness. One is the Rāshtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or National Volunteer Organization, and the other is the Bhāratīya Jana Sangh, or Indian People's Party. The Rāshtriya Swayamsevak Sangh—or R.S.S., as it is commonly called—came into existence in 1925, calling itself a cultural organization with the purpose of training the Indian people in a philosophy of action founded upon their historical

society and the cultural heritage of their traditional community. The Bhāratiya Jana Sangh—or Jana Sangh as it is usually called—is a product of the R.S.S., created in 1951 to be an expression of the R.S.S. in the political arena. In the past decade its rapid growth, particularly in the Hindi-speaking north, made it a force to be reckoned with, though, of course, given the current political situation in India, no one can tell just what its future will be.

The R.S.S. proclaims its firm conviction that there is an appropriate, in fact divinely, ordained foundation upon which Indian political policy and action must be based if India is to become the viable vehicle for Bhāratiya Sanskriti and Dharma Rājya—that is, Indian Culture and the rule of spirituality. The cultural organization, the R.S.S., lays the basis for the political party, the Jana Sangh. Elements in one are noticeably present in the other, and the two intertwine until they become almost indistinguishable. Political action and Hindutva—Hindu religion, culture, and history—all become one and the same thing. To quote the leader of the R.S.S., Gurūji Golwalkar, "In Hindusthan, religion is an all absorbing entity. . . . it has become eternally woven into the life of the race, and forms, as it were, its very soul. With us every action in life, individual, social, or political, is a command of religion. . . . we are what our great religion has made us. Our race spirit is a child of our religion, and so with us culture is but a product of our all-comprehensive religion, a part of its body and not distinguishable from it."⁸

A study of Golwalkar's many speeches and writings reveals repeated emphasis on the basic tenets associated with the classical formulations of Hindu philosophy-theology; there is constant reiteration of the great tradition as it is presented by some of the present-day Hindu religious groups. The "eternal and ennobling values" that Golwalkar speaks of and that he is seeking to rejuvenate among the Indian people are fundamental themes recurring throughout Hindu literature. It is relatively simple to establish the close interweaving by Golwalkar and others of these ancient and still-appelling values with present-day India's concern to possess viable, indigenous moorings in the modern world.

These philosophical and religious tenets, together with idealized social forms that have supported them and that have also been sanctioned by them, are made the foundations for a religious-cultural-political rallying-together of the Indian-Hindu

people. Non-Indian investigators, and many Hindus, may question the sincerity of or, perhaps more accurately, the way in which such groups and their leaders use these traditional religious concepts and stress their value—and those who doubt the political future and impact of these groups may be correct in their analysis. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt but that a primary aspect of the religious ferment in India today is expressing itself in a cultural-political form that gains its basic strength from a concentration upon idealized religious values that are maintained by the Mahasabha, the R.S.S., the Jana Sangh, and others to have flourished in the past.

A second feature of religious ferment to which I would draw attention focuses upon the norms of the social structure, the idealized ways of association and behavior, the custom moralities—those matters which in Hindu India generally have been considered to be a part of *Sanātanadharma*, the eternal truth by which men should live, in fact must live, if existence is to be proper and in accord with universal law. Following the injunction of W. Brede Kristensen that "every religion ought to be understood from its own standpoint, for that is how it is understood by its own adherents,"⁹ it is essential that we recognize that for the mass of the adherents to Hinduism a central, if not the central, element of what they have understood to be religion is the manner in which life is lived through its daily associations, responsibilities, and pleasures.

The question for us is whether the various components so closely associated with traditional Hindu religion, especially at the popular folk level, are in ferment. Certainly we are aware that within the cities of India today there is an agitation, in some instances an almost chaotic excitement, that indicates more than mere superficial change. Associated as this ferment is with industrialization and massive populations gathered in settings that are very different from those of the traditional past, does this unfamiliar condition work toward, and perhaps demand, a change in the traditional norms of religious cult, social intercourse, and association? Does it affect the means whereby the established values of the religious past are conveyed to the present and future Hindu Indian?

And, of equal importance, what is the situation in regard to these matters in the villages and countryside that still contain the bulk of the Indian people? The ferment, it is true, is more

readily apparent in the urban areas, but are we safe in concluding that the village and the countryside continue in their age-old ways without perceptible and meaningful change? I am certain that in this regard I do not need to cite the numerous studies of rural and village India that while recognizing the tendency of rural people to remain close to their traditional structures, also point out that the situation today is such that despite the hold of tradition upon them, the peoples of these areas are aware of the new opportunities that are confronting them. They are in many instances both aware of the opportunities and cautiously but with determination slowly setting about to become acquainted with that which is new.

In the matter of religious cult, we know that among some of the so-called modernized elite and others a process of cultic abbreviation is taking place.¹⁰ But we know that the modern technology and resulting atmosphere that encourages such change also is furnishing means for the wider dissemination of the traditional values associated with and preserved by the ancient cultic forms. The few great temple complexes that in one form or another are associated with and are encouraging such supposedly modern and new things as hospitals and universities—such as at Tirupatti in southern India—despite the surface appearance of departing somewhat from the traditional, continue to educate the Hindu people in the purāṇic lore that is the core of popular Hinduism. Temples are being built and refurbished; loudspeakers, movie projectors, and printing presses are carrying the purāṇic and epic tales to the people of the villages and rural areas in a fashion reminiscent of the days when royal patronage of Hindu art and drama was the rule rather than the exception.

But we must be cautious here. The change is sometimes almost imperceptible. It can hardly be said that it is so intense that there is ferment. If we only listen to the voices of the intellectually elite whose modernization is almost but not quite exclusively a westernization—to those whom Professor Shils of Chicago described so well in his *The Intellectual between Tradition and Modernity: The Indian Situation*—we might easily come to the conclusion that Hindu cultic change is in reality the beginning of cultic disappearance. If we pay attention only, or primarily, to the words of leaders of certain modernized religious groups that are seeking to export Hinduism to the West as well as to revive Hinduism in India itself, we run the risk of making

the false assumption that Hindu cult is fully cleansed of those aspects that the modernized Hindu considers to be unhealthy accretions to true Hindu worship. Whatever the case in regard to cult, ritual purity, religious-social rites of passage, and the like, we need to watch them carefully, knowing that much of the impact and persistence of Hinduism is to be found in them and their importance to the Indian people.

Only brief mention can be given to that most fascinating of subjects to the student of India—caste. The centrality of caste within the Indian social-religious structure, and in contemporary Indian politics also, is well recognized. Many studies by Indians and non-Indians alike dispute the conclusion of so many uninformed observers that caste is ceasing to play the central role in Indian life that it has in the past. Here if anywhere in Indian-Hindu social and religious life there is ferment. There is excitement and certainly there has been agitation. But rather than there being a disappearance of caste, as some Hindu apologists continue to claim, there is overwhelming evidence that caste is emerging, often in new forms, as one of the most decisive factors in Hindu life. This is not to suggest that caste as it actually is or as it is ideally formulated by some is evil. It is rather to insist that it is not inevitably crumbling before contemporary pressures. Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, in their excellent study *The Modernity of Tradition*, put the situation very accurately when they wrote that in India "caste is losing the functions, norms, and structure once associated with it and acquiring new ones. It is serving the ritual and occupational goals of traditional society less, the mobility and participation goals of modern society more."¹¹

For the religious tradition that is Hinduism, caste—whether in ancient form or in some newly emerging idealized guise—remains fundamental to the dharma that is incumbent upon the Hindu as it is normally understood. The ferment in regard to caste that has occurred during this century has been not only a movement of adaptability, though it has certainly been that; it has also resulted in a period of discovery in which both old and new functions of value to Hindu India have come to be recognized as being within the province of caste. Ferment has not meant disappearance of caste; rather, it has meant a reinvigoration of it, with the result that it is now venturing with confidence into new areas of operation.

The final aspect of religious ferment—or perhaps lack of it—that I would mention concerns the underlying intellectual affirmations, the inherited beliefs concerning the nature of being. For me these are best understood as the “visceral presuppositions or assumptions” that mark an individual and the others who with him constitute a religious-cultural tradition.

In his study *India As a Secular State*, Donald E. Smith begins by saying, “The religious temperament and outlook of the Indian people may have been exaggerated by some writers, but it is nonetheless true that religion has been the most powerful single factor in the development of Indian civilization.”¹² The question that I would raise is, What is the present state of the traditional themes, the metaphysical formulations, upon which that religious temperament and outlook have been based?

If we consider the philosophy-theology—the various conceptions as to the nature of human and cosmic existence that have characterized Indian thought since the emergence of the Upanishads and the time of the Buddha and that constitute the core of the great tradition of Hinduism—it appears to be clear that these matters or beliefs are not considered by their intellectual inheritors to be inappropriate for the intelligent man and woman of today. With few exceptions, the Hindu intellectual, surrounded as he increasingly is by processes of modernization that appear to challenge so much of the traditional, makes his philosophic orientation fundamentally upon a base that is dependent upon themes and structures associated with the great thinkers of India's past—Shankara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, and others. In addition, he is the beneficiary of the Indian intellectual ferment of the past two centuries, with its renaissance of pride in things Indian and its attempt to reform and revive the tradition. As a result, the ancient philosophical and theological themes as interpreted by earlier thinkers are also made viable today because of the work of Ram Mohan Roy, Dayānand Saraswati, Vivekānanda, Radhakrishnan, and others. Today the Hindu intellectual proceeds from these basic themes to the consideration of the value or disvalue of new or foreign philosophic speculation. There are few Indian thinkers who set about to dispute the fundamental presuppositions that are the very warp and woof of the traditional Hindu *Weltanschauung*. Rather, the activity within Indian intellectual speculation (it can hardly be termed a ferment) is to be seen in the concern to demonstrate that the ancient themes, rightly understood, are supported by the

rational norms and procedures associated with modernity. The end result is that the traditional core around which Indian-Hindu philosophy and religious speculation has revolved is held to be the *only* viable basis for a meaningful Hindu society in the modern present.

I have limited these last remarks to the Hindu intellectual and to the educated class in general. Of course, there are exceptions: there are some rebellious university-educated youth and there are business, political, and labor leaders at various levels for whom these cultural-religious moorings are outmoded vestiges of the past. But these are relatively few, and their not-very-frequent attacks upon the cherished metaphysical beliefs have so far resulted in little if any ferment.

At the wider level of the masses of the Hindu people the situation is similar. Here the awareness of the philosophical tradition is less precise, of course, yet the basic elements that the tradition is built upon and that the tradition perpetuates continue to be central to the life orientation of the Indian people. Dharma, Karma, Samsāra, Atman, Jiva, Ishvara, Avatāra—these and others under whatever local name—are the bedrock of Indian religion and common thought. Together with purāṇic legend, both local and nationwide, they give a religious quality and identity to Hindu life. The presence of ferment, of excitement, in regard to them is difficult to discover.

At the beginning of this essay I sought to make the obvious even more obvious by emphasizing the variety of assessments that can be made concerning religious ferment in Asia. I also stressed the role of the suggestive generalization as an aid to understanding, despite the dangers inherent in generalizations.

In the instance of India and Hinduism the generalization that observation forces upon me is that the religious ferment there, to the degree that it can be discovered, is one wherein the traditional is seeking to assert itself within the context of modernity. In so doing, it rejects the notion that modernity is something essentially contradictory to the core values of the tradition. These values are *shruti*—revelation from the Divine. They are founded in Ultimate Reality, and they are necessarily applicable to political life and forms and to social structures and relationships in any age.

If as students of Asia we ignore this fact in regard to any of the traditional religions of the area, however they formulate

their basic themes, we run the grave danger of understanding them in our own terms rather than theirs. The Muslim of Pakistan and Indonesia, the Hindu of India, and the Buddhist of many areas of Asia will either continue to be extremely mysterious, or he will be assumed to be just like us, only perhaps not quite as modern. In either case he will remain unknown.

If this be true, then we will all too often see religious ferment where there is only momentary agitation without lasting significance; we will also run the risk of failing to discern the significant ferment that frequently, in a quiet fashion, renews the traditional while incorporating the new and modern into itself.

NOTES

1. Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 2, *The Middle Years: 1914-1944* (New York, 1969), p. 191.
2. Mohammad Fadhel Jamali, *Letters on Islam* (London, 1965), p. 90.
3. R. N. Dasgökar, "Hindu Intellectuals under Recent Impacts of Modern Culture," *Proceedings of the XI International Congress of the I.A.H.R.*, 1:90 (1968).
4. Jerrold Schecter, *The New Face of Buddha* (New York, 1967), p. xi.
5. Max Weber, *The Religion of India*, trans. H. H. Gerth and D. Martindale (New York, 1967), p. 227.
6. W. C. Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton, N.J., 1957), p. 225.
7. Richard C. Bush, "The Impact of Communism on Religions in China," *Proceedings of the XI International Congress of the I.A.H.R.*, 3:72 (1968).
8. M. S. Golwalkar, *We: Or Our Nationhood Defined* (Nagpur, India, 1947), pp. 27 f. Quoted in J. A. Curran, Jr., *Militant Hinduism in Indian Politics: A Study of the R.S.S.* (New York, 1951), p. 29.
9. W. Brede Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion* (The Hague, 1960), p. 6.
10. See Milton Singer, "The Great Tradition in a Metropolitan Center: Madras," in *Traditional India: Structure and Change* (Philadelphia, 1959).
11. Lloyd I. and Susanne Hoebler Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago, 1967), p. 103.
12. Donald E. Smith, *India As a Secular State* (Princeton, N.J., 1963), p. vii.