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FREEDOM OF BELIEF AND ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN INDIA

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Abstract

To characterize any religious phenomenon from outside, we inevitably use social symbols and concepts, but they can be applied only to a certain cultural context, where the motives of religious actors derive from the wholeness of geopolitical unity and religious doctrine, which both lead to “lived religion” in concrete culture. To speak about freedom in religion today means not to give a degree of more or less, but to criticize the habitual meaning of such constructs as “freedom” and to use it as a tool for analyzing social problems, one of which is ecological crisis. Hindu tolerant worldview is still the basis of coexistence of states, culturally quite different from each other, in language, in law, in religion. There is an opinion that freedom can still help to neutralize the European spirit of consumerism by the old Indian idea of ahimsa. The central idea of Indian religious worldview is ahimsa. Contemporary analogy of ahimsa in western science is “environmental ethics”. Both having non-anthropocentric logics, they seem to have something in common. Both of them suggest something more than human existence as a highest aim of life. Trying to apply religious tools to environmental problems, we clearly see two parallels: freedom of expression in Indian religions looks very much like tolerance, and ahimsa is similar to environmental ethics. It needs to verify these analogies.

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1. Introduction

When it comes to religious space, it's not enough to describe its phenomenon on the model of other social fields. The meaning of such familiar concepts as freedom, advantage, human rights, equality, etc., cannot be clarified without including into concrete religious and cultural situation. According to Ivan Strenski and "lived religion" approach, we have a possibility to understand the motives of religious actors if we thoroughly observe the phenomenological picture of real religious community life, for a while abstracting ourselves from our premises. One of such premises is the notion "freedom" which is supposed to be the tool of analyzing the social expression of a human being. But how this notion works in understanding *religious* experience?

2. Problem Statement

This research is implemented in theoretical and empirical-practical ways. The first phase was implemented theoretically through studying the approaches, methods, methodologies used by such scholars of the field as Apresyan (2010), Nelson (2010), Jensen (2017), Horujy (2020), Hall (2018), Bermejo (2000), Barbato (2020), Bhat (2019), Velassery and Patra (2019), Wong (2021), Young (2019), and many others. As for the topic of religious consciousness, our special attention was not payed to this conception in general, but to the aspect of correlation with ecology. It is very important to study how people perceive the concept of religious consciousness in general and in applying to ecological issues in particular.

3. Research Questions

- To get more knowledge on the research of religious consciousness;
- To study different approaches to religious consciousness in india and in russia and to use the theoretical framework to understand the connection between religious and ecological consciousness in india;
- To learn more about the principles of understanding cultural and religious peculiarities of india;
- To reveal the effective experience of interpretation of modern religious thinking as a part of lived religion in the context of solving global ecological problems.

4. Purpose of the Study

We have a lot of material from field researches and empirical observations of everyday life of Indian religious communities since 2008, and have long ago made Christian churches and Hindu temples of India subject of our constant attention. We are having the aim to elaborate our field material through a modern and applicable theoretical approach. The purpose of our study is to analyze the possible hindrances in understanding the unity of religious and ecological thinking in India as a part of modern life.

5. Research Methods

To research this area, we have to face the religious reality today. We use “lived religion” methodology, which is “radical empirical approach” (Ivan Strenski) in sociology of religion based on Max Weber’s *Verstehen* method and Durkheim’s philosophy (Strenski, 2020). We also follow the methodology of synergic anthropology of Horujy (2020).

The research is based on the qualitative methodology which includes the following components: review of specialized books, studies, articles, reports and electronic resources in different languages, media resources (press conferences, articles, etc.), in-depth interviews conducted with the representatives of religious denominations in India, observations at the worships. During and after the research we organized several discussions on the topic with the inclusion of specialists from theology, religious studies, sociology, psychology.

6. Findings

The historians say that initially in XVI century Indians willingly accepted the baptizing from St. Francis Xavier and then returned to their old worships, combining them with Christian beliefs (Bermejo, 2000). It is fruitful to consider the reflection of this freedom of belief in the problems of global modern world. One of them is worldwide ecological crisis, which effects have been felt within South Asia more recently and hence demand a peculiar attention. As India and other countries cope with decreasing air quality in its cities and degraded water, religious thinkers have begun to reflect on how the values of traditional religion might contribute to inspiring better care for the earth (Lipner, 1994). One of the greatest features of Hindu tradition that’s supposed to help with the crisis is freedom (Barbato, 2020). Freedom to worship what you want to worship, to combine contradictory factors like scientific and technical development with religious rituals (Nelson, 2010).

It is true that the systems of big spiritual practices already contain certain paradigms of ecological consciousness. And even without a thorough research the very idea of *sansara* that overwhelms all the creatures obviously looks like the evidence of ancient connection between religious and environmental ethics. Meanwhile, Hinduism offers a variety of cosmological views that may or may not situate the human in the natural world in an ecologically friendly manner (Chapple, 2011) if we remind the episode in *Mahabharata*, where Krishna and Arjuna cruelly burned the forest and were throwing its fleeing creatures to the fire, according to the demand of god Agni (Gosling, 2002).

Not only religious but all cultural life of India presents the organic neighborhood of separate fragments. City dwellers of Varanasi are puzzled when asked why the newest technologies and institutions join the districts of medieval destitute level of life. They don’t understand why they should destroy the old style if they can build the new one near. It is noticeable that freedom of coexistence of contradictive phenomena has nothing to do with tolerance as the latest Western concept. In South-East Asia there is no tolerance for the sake of non-conflicting whole, because contradictions have ontological status and they need no tolerance. Alike with the general freedom concept, religious understanding of ecology demonstrates the primordial cultural acceptance of contradictions and prepares the critical analysis of religious ecological ideas.

Probably the most important ecological motive for India is birth control topic. Indian religious scholars and ecologists testify to natural resources shortage together with the severe poverty and the escalation of environmental problems, such as environmental impact of large populations. They even remark that, if sexual restraint as a Jaina religious rule takes root to secular consciousness it might help minimize population growth.

The issue of population growth was handled by the United Nations report on environment “Our Common Future” in 1987. The report acknowledges the potential role of the world’s major religions in addressing social and environmental issues, stating that the world’s religions could help provide direction and motivation in forming new values that would stress individual and joint responsibility towards the environment and towards nurturing harmony between humanity and environment. So how applicable were religious values since 1987? Alas, rates of population growth in India are only increasing. How does it coincide with the Mangala Hindu principle which proclaims that your prosperity is not going to be at the cost of somebody else?

The answers of Indian researchers may be surprising. They point out that “every child born in an industrial nation consumes eight times as much of the earth’s natural resources as a child born in a developing country” (Gosling, 2002, p. 3), and “if the entire population of the world were transported to the USA and spread evenly across the states, the overall population density there would be no greater than it is now in Netherlands!” (Gosling, 2002, p. 3).

Many articles in scientific journals and in press discuss the problem of reduction ecological resources in southern states, popular among tourists, like Goa and Kerala (Patel, 2020). Decrease of fish species and its quantity is presented as a consequence of tourism developing and fish export to European countries. Meanwhile the factor of population growth doesn’t appear on the surface as a possible reason of the resources problem.

The general interpretation of life circles doesn’t necessarily refer to Hindu beliefs. Indian Catholic priests argue that there’s no need for a special policy on the subject of depopulation, because “people are better educated now, they know what they need”. Besides the evident Catholic position about birth control, they realize the specificity of procreation topic for Indian culture. Asia News reported that at least 80 percent of pilgrims who formally honor Mother Mary at shrines come from non-Catholic backgrounds, including burqa-clad Muslim women (Nelson, 2010). This can be explained by India's long history of "mother goddess" figures. The ordinary clergy mostly pay attention to Mary as a saint mother. As a consequence, Mary often has supremacy over baby Jesus for many Indians. It emphasizes the fundamental role of motherhood constituting Indian women’s identity. For average Indian woman it is much harder to hypothetically sacrifice this function on behalf of prosperity of nature and decrease of population, than it would be for European woman.

As for some popular new religious movements, like Society of Krishna Consciousness, their members are very tolerant to those Hindu traditions which don’t make any *immediate and physical* harm to the environment. Evidently, the postponed effect of some rituals is not taken into consideration. In this way it is not condemned that for Indians it is important for parents to have a boy, because only a boy can fulfill the funeral ritual over father. They continue to have children until they have a boy, then they stop it. And it is not out of place to mention that pregnancy ultrasound was prohibited in some states because

after a woman learns she'll have a girl, she makes an abortion. And of course, many cases of infanticide of girls, especially in northern states, are well-known. The followers of Krishna disapprove abortions and killings, but not the ritual that leads to it. Again, religious practice is above the care for the living. The leaders of Krishna society are convinced that there aren't too many people on the planet, but there is disproportional distribution of resources. In the end of Kali Yuga the consciousness will change anyway, and the awareness will increase. So, no special action is needed to remedy the distortion, whether it's social or natural.

If western ecological consciousness presumes that you *do* something to restore the natural balance, *a-himsa* as a greatest feature of Hindu cultures means that you *don't* do anything to break this balance. To care about the nature is not to harm the nature. Ahimsa, as well as Mangala principle, are intended on fulfilling individual karma. When you keep to this principle in your life, and in general it comes to worldwide crisis (for example, overpopulation in India, or enormous usage of plastic bags in Thailand), this is not your responsibility or infringement of the principle.

The apparent contradictions are not the consequence of religious communities' ignorance. The reason is secular misinterpretation of the phenomenon of spiritual practice. From the religious point of view care for the earth is not the aim but the means of achieving the needful moral standard as a condition for spiritual development. Ahimsa, sansara and karma have relation to ecology as an order, but they are about *social and spiritual* order, while environmental ethics is about order of nature.

Environmental ethics is based on the value of world's unity in sense of nature. But when it comes to religious consciousness, the nature as itself doesn't exist. Nature is a prolongation of higher powers, the variety of which implies the values, which have a peculiarity to be concrete, conditional and fragmentary. For example, traditionally, the rivers of India have always been considered pure. Industrial contaminants and human wastes have polluted the rivers, but Ganga is still quite important in India's ritual life. Contamination may reach the highest level, but to be pure ritually and ecologically has never been the same. Local people in Varanasi believe that ritual ablution in Ganga is safe for Indians, but dangerous for foreigners, so the natural pollution invasion in organism is prevented by supernatural power, which protects people from the results of their activity and hence from responsibility. Yamuna river at masterpiece of Taj Mahal is already quite dead and unrecoverable because of industrial and sewage waste, it smells so much that you can hardly breathe in the mausoleum and in city Agra in general. But you should not show any displeasure because it will be interpreted as insult and intolerance.

Of course, the protection of nature is vastly spread idea in India, but it is perceived through the concrete religious plot. In Indian northern state Himachal Pradesh one can see many government posters "Stop animal sacrifice!" Sacrificing buffalos is a necessary part of annual ritual worshipping goddess Hadimba. This goddess is believed to be a real historical person, one of Pandavas family, originally from Manali, the capital of Himachal. As she is from the "bad" family, she presents the type of God that needs blood. Local people of Vashishta village say, that the years when there're no sacrifices (because of the government educational policy), many people in the village get injured, a lot of accidents happen. If the person, who is responsible for fulfilling sacrifice, agrees to stop it, he gets completely mad. The inhabitants believe that it is impossible to abolish the important practice, because the inside sacred life, especially when the village is separated from the world by snow in winter time, cannot be seen and

understood from the outside. Rama's wife, Sita, helped to open the famous hot holy serum springs in Vashishta. Every year, thanks to animal sacrifice, Rama chooses the person for revelation, and this man starts to prophesy, even if he was completely stupid before. You can recognize the chosen by special signs like trembling, warmth radiance, great energy that you feel from him.

This position is not the superstition of uneducated village people lost in Kulu valley of Himalaya. Citizens of Himachal who travel a lot all over the world and even work in different countries for a part time of the year, expressed in interview similar ideas. It wouldn't be correct though to think that it is Hinduism that causes the character of the story. Muslim minority in Himachal is not inclined to evaluate Hadimba's bloody rituals as idolatry. Ordinary Muslims are very tolerant to animal sacrifice for feeding god Hadimba and making people happy. If you ask them about the contradiction between the only God Allah and Hadimba, they would often say that separated elements of sacred valuable life may not coincide, but they are still significant, even if we don't see them in wholeness.

The usual Hindu explanation runs that this way of thinking has nothing to do with what we call paganism. Hadimba demands blood not because she has a special character, weird whim and she is separated from the good and creating source of the Universe. On the contrary, she is one of the displays of the unite Absolute God, which are always beyond human logic and systematic thinking. The human wisdom is to see, how the transcendent embodies in reality in this very place of earth in unique way. Hadimba is not the goddess of evil. Her temples are very dark, because she came from under the earth. Her shrines are like a cave, and you cannot even come in there, but only bend and look inside. The devotees of Hadimba believe that it is good not to kill anyone, but *this* God needs blood. What is bad in general, can be good in particular.

7. Conclusion

Freedom of expression in religion may include different worships and unite all life forms as equally valuable into the whole universe, but it is not similar to physical universe, and it is above it, as well as it is beyond human understanding. Religious understanding of ecology is theocentric, while environmental ethics is biocentric. The actions of supporting earth life may be the same, but motives and axiological foundations are different. For classical philosophical example, Kant actively spoke in defense of animals, against causing them unnecessary and the crueller suffering. He firmly believed the torture of animals is immoral, but not because animals are suffering, but because their torture leads to the moral roughness of a human being (Apresyan, 2010).

Still some resources may be actualized by referring to the environmental attitudes of some ascetic traditions, like ahimsa, but it should be taken into account, that they are active only in traditional society with small population. Care about the nature often has a character of secondary action of spiritual training. Traditional means of care about living beings are contradictory, not self-valuable inside the religious system and unpredictable in case of giving them a mass character. In this regard the dissemination of some eastern religious principles, such as vegetarianism, nonviolence, etc., regarding them to be universal ethics, is not correct, because religious and ecological consciousnesses are two different spheres of being. Using religious statements for solving ecological problems is similar to using ecological consciousness for spiritual growth. Non-universality of ecological motives must not be a

hindrance but the basis for research of their possible adaptability to universal needs of environment. It is hard to count on religious attitudes in global situations, but they can help us to understand the national character and certain anthrop type.

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