

Why We Need Religion for Social Stability!

In India it was very common for people to ask each other questions like, "what are you doing over Christmas holidays?" or "what are you doing over Diwali holidays?" or "what are you doing over Ramadan holidays?" regardless of whether or not the person who was a Christian or Hindu or Muslim. When I moved to the US, I was politely reminded that it was always better to use neutral language something rather flat like, "what are your holiday plans?" There is something about the spice of humanity that is lost in this blandness.

I lived in India for the first two and a half decades of my life. I have now lived another decade and a half in the West. In writing this post, I believe I am violating one of the cardinal rules of polite conversation in the West - which is don't talk about religion. Growing up in India, I had never heard any such sentiment expressed about religion. The reason has to do with how people see religion. In the East religion is seen as a part of one's rootedness in the great tides of history. In the West the common perception seems to be that religion causes harm.

Cars sometimes cause harm. But that does not stop us from using a car. We try to come up with societal rules and regulations which help make commuting with cars safe. We do this because the utility that cars provide is enormous in comparison to the harm they cause. Religion sometimes causes harm. But religion also has a lot of social utility so I want to make a case that we need to come up with some societal rules of engagement to reduce harm caused by religion. So that we can enjoy the utility that the society gets from religion.

What societal utility does religion provide?

Emile Durkheim, whom some consider as the Father of Sociological sciences was researching a peculiar phenomenon at the turn of the 20th century. Industrial revolution had made western Europe wealthy and affluent. But there was also a rise in the suicide rates among the wealthy which sounded counterintuitive. Emile Durkheim researched this phenomenon. He found that suicides were low among people who were a part of Catholic communities whose adherence to religious festivities and rituals were high. Suicide rates were high among people who were isolated and not connected to any tight knit community. He coined a phrase "anomie" to refer to people who were not associated with any tightly knit social groups. Religion in providing community also creates social stability.

I grew up in India, the birth place of multiple religions. All religions had different festivities and rituals associated with it. All religions were rather in-your-face about it in a way I have never seen in the west. The upside of this was that it created communal bonds. People who went to the religious festivities felt seen and valued and had a deep sense that they were a part of something big. Martin Seligman, is dubbed by some as the father of Positive Psychology. He says in his book *Authentic Happiness* that people who rate the highest in life satisfaction are people who have a sense of the transcendent, in which they feel like they belong to something bigger than they are. He says this is often provided to people through their spiritual

and religious practices. This is how the communal practice of religion brings individual well being as well. Individual well being leads to social stability.

It is true that religion has created conflict at different times. We can look back at the religious wars in 16th century Europe or the religious riots which happened in India from time to time. That said, one thing that helps bring social stability in India where there are over 24 major languages spoken, is religion. Two people coming from different parts of the country speaking different religions, share a common religion bringing a sense of unity. When people see the value of their own religious experience, they would also respect others religious experiences, even when they follow different religions. This mutual valuing of others religious experiences continues to societal stability.

When respect for others religion is missing the probability for conflict increases. This is the part where as a society there need to be some rules and guidelines, just like how have rules around driving of cars. We need to create societal rules for the possibility of religious pluralism, so that different religions can peacefully coexist and exchange ideas with each other, learn from each other and work towards using the best that religion has to offer to create societal peace without losing the diverse spiciness of humanity.