

Human Rights and Religion

Ranbir Singh (*Hindu Human Rights*)

Abstract:

Have religions been the basis for human rights, or impeded them?

In Sanskrit there is no word for 'religion'. Dharma describes correct action in the relevant context. It can also mean duty, inherent nature, and much else. Already we are faced with a problematic issue because monotheistic creeds and therefore the western mindset has no such equivalent.

We face the same issue with 'rta'. What is it? It is the principle of natural order which regulates and coordinates the operation of the cosmos. Now conceptually, it is closely allied to the injunctions and ordinances thought to uphold it, collectively referred to as *Dharma*, and the action of the individual in relation to those ordinances, referred to as *Karma*. These are actions which depending upon whether they are done in accordance or in opposition to rta and Dharma, yield the corresponding results. The individual is thus responsible for his or her actions and behaviour in this law of moral causation.

Karma, Rta and Dharma are shaped by social customs and the relevant environment. As essential features of what is called 'Hinduism' they are blamed for creating the human hierarchy known as caste. But all premodern societies were unequal and inegalitarian. So with this in mind it is not that human societies should be unequal, it is that some form of hierarchy and indeed differences exist, and how best to organise and understand the complexities. Dharma does this much more effectively than secular 'faiths' which in their drive to create utopia and indeed earthly immortality, have ironically only succeeded in manifesting a nightmarish dystopia with mass famine, internecine violence and genocide on a scale hitherto unimagined; and yet all in the name of some greater good and building a brave new world. Yet these ideologies have not been subject to the same blame, scapegoating and even scrutiny that has been applied to religious faiths.

Culture and religion are said to be different. Yet this makes no sense in the premodern era. If religion is based on text, then where does that leave oral tradition, custom, and practises of one's ancestors? If a society such as the Native Australians is illiterate, can it be said to have no religion, and only culture? Absurd as this may sound it would be the only logical conclusion to draw. But of course they do have a code of ethics and morality, even if it may differ drastically from what we understand these concepts to be. It is without these basic notions and ideas, intrinsically intertwining the worlds of the sacred and profane, that we stumble in the dark in trying to understand the role of religion in human rights. Without the basic system of ethics and morality the very idea of human rights could not have developed, and these elements are rooted in societies which modern secularists would dismiss as superstitious and primitive.