

RELIGION AND MAN'S EQUALITY: THE CHRISTIAN VIEW.

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Abstract

The equality of mankind is practically accepted by all peoples nowadays. Indeed the 140 or more members of the United Nations representing over 95% of the world population openly declare and accept this idea of equality. But if we may take a cue from Karl Marx, we may describe the history of mankind as a history of the inequalities of man. The Christian vision of equality and worth was an improvement on other societies, even of the Greeks, but in its earlier forms it had its limitations. While accepting the equality of all men in Christ, one could argue that the set of ideas that has dominated the Christian order of things from the earliest times have been overwhelmingly in favour of assumptions in equality, both between Christians and outsiders, between different kinds of Christians within the Church. Indeed the principle of hierarchy that characterize the Church is not equality.

Introduction

If we may take a cue from Karl Marx, we may describe the history of mankind as a history of the in-equalities of man. The Greek genius created homosapiens, the privileged wiseman who on the shoulder of the downtrodden, invented science and organized the city on rational principles. But the genius of the Greeks was not capable of creating the craftsman, who, by the mechanical arts, mastered the forces of nature and harnessed them to the service of mankind. Before he could appear, there had to be a moral and social revolution which would abolish slavery and rehabilitate manual labour and the mechanical arts. This was largely an accomplishment of Christianity.

The Christian message was not primarily intended to reform the structures of society. Its primary purpose was to announce the coming of the Kingdom of God, waiting for the great judgement, each person was to remain in the condition where God has placed him. St. Paul recommended to slaves that they be obedient to their masters, and to masters that they be good to their slaves. Although some Christians practiced slavery as harshly as any master in the ancient society, nevertheless Christianity itself by declaring that all men descended from the same stock, that they were all children of God, all equally redeemed by the person of Christ and all equal as brothers and sisters, established the equal dignity of all men without exception, irrespective of condition, race, or nationality.

It is true that Christian writers accepted slavery as a fact. The elimination of slavery never suggested itself to them. But the Christian slave is, before God, the equal of the rich man, the free man and of his own master. He is admitted on the footing of complete access to the highest office. Thus one slave, Callistus, became Pope. Furthermore the Church recommended the freeing of slaves as the highest form of almsgiving and the most acceptable form of penance.

The scriptural documentation of the equality of mankind, and the acceptance of inequalities, and above all the divine righteousness for the oppressed, is rich with deep roots in the Old Testament. The ideal citizen is the righteous one, whose practical action for oppressed shows that he truly knows God, one who pursues justice with zeal and delight. The Sermon on the Mount is the Christian charter for human society, a community of brothers and sisters based on the fatherhood of God.

Although the Christian vision of equality and worth was an improvement on other societies, even of the Greeks in its earlier form it had its limitations. While accepting the equality of all men in Christ before the Father one could argue that the set of ideas that has dominated the Christian order of things from the earliest times have been overwhelmingly in favour of assumptions of inequality between Christians and outsiders and between different kinds of Christians within the Church.

One could indeed claim that it is the principle of hierarchy that has characterised the church, not equality. The word itself was coined by a Christian Platonist, pseudo-Dionysius, to express the order of things in the cosmos descending from the fountain head of God. In the ecclesiastical hierarchy, as in the celestial hierarchy, the higher ranks illuminate purity and perfect the lower ranks > with such divine

clericalised portion of society where the Pope preceded the Emperor, the Church, the State, the priest, the layman, and man and woman. The principle of hierarchy tended to sanction in the name of faith many of the inequalities already established in that society, such as for instance the relationship between man and woman, educated and non educated in public and social life.

In this connection therefore we should note that one cannot expect from the Church a wisdom and insight about the equality of man beyond its own time. There are certain truths in the scriptures such as the doctrine on equality that must await the congenial cultural conditions before they reach consciousness and practice. Thus the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment have played their parts in bringing into focus a sharper consciousness of the equality of mankind. It is with this background in mind that we now analyse the concept of equality.

The Idea Of Equality Today:

The equality of mankind is practically accepted by all people nowadays. Indeed all the members of the United Nations openly declare this equality when in the preamble to the charter they claim they are determined:

To reaffirm faith in fundamental rights,
In the dignity and worth of the human person,
In the equal rights of men and women

Now there is one sense at least in which the claim that all men are equal is simple false. People differ in strength, intelligences, ability and courage. We can then call this the strong meaning of equality. Since this claim is obviously false, it is normally modified to meaning all men are equal by virtue of their humanity. But if that is the sole claim in the name of equality, we seem to have ended up with a good old time platitude. For there few people indeed who deny that all men are equal in this sense. Let us then call this claim the weak sense of the term 'equality'.

The difference in the two senses of equality presents us with a unique challenge. On the one hand we must ensure that we do not produce an absurdity and on the other, we must say something more than repeating a platitude. In taking up this challenge we shall examine three areas where the concept is commonly used.

The Idea Of Equality And Humanity:

Although the concept of equality and humanity is a platitude, it is a very important claim. The fact is, there are people who claim that others should be treated differently than themselves. Similarly, there are political arrangements that systematically institutionalize inequality that amount to a denial of such people's humanity. Such arrangements are deliberately established to deprive groups of the necessary health, security and educational facilities for their well being as human beings. But the removable feature about such discrimination is that those who perpetrate such arrangements insist on the claim that all men are equal. They readily subscribe to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as South Africa did in 1984, the very year that she embarked on her policy of apartheid. Perpetrators of discrimination will even admit that the group against whom they carry out policies of discrimination is equal to themselves as human beings. What they will not admit is the obligation to treat that group as they treat members of their own group.

The Idea Of Equality And The Moral Worth Of Man:

In discussing this issue, philosophers have at times chosen different criteria establishing men's moral worth. John Rawls (1972) for example in his influential book: *A Theory of Justice*, has suggested that equality can be founded on the natural characteristics of human beings. He suggested the possession of moral personality as the basis for the principle that all men are equal. But he further observed that, as with human endowments in general, moral personality is unevenly distributed. He says, it is arguable that not every human being is endowed with functional moral capacity.

Peter Singer, in his book, *Practical Ethics*, also states that,
I doubt any natural characteristic
whether a "ravage property" or not can
fulfil this function, for doubt that
there is any exactly significant
property which all human beings
possess.

For if we may add, every so-called natural endowment is unequally shared and if it is made the basis of equality it will justify new forms of inequality as colour, and race, and sex as it is today. Therefore we are left with the obvious conclusion that irrespective of moral capacities, we do share in a common dignity and worthiness, that if anything is the case, such dignity and worthiness is the source of our moral capacity. We may then propose as basis for the equality of man a certain absoluteness about his dignity which antecedes, transcends, and is the basis of all other features of man, equality inclusive.

The Idea Of Equality And Inequality Of Circumstances Of Life.

Under this broad heading, we shall discuss some specific inequalities of circumstances of life as its directly affects man.

Inequality of Need

Inequality of need refers to some state that demands treatment of satisfaction. But what happens if there are two people, both of whom are injured, but one seriously since he has broken leg and the other lightly since he has only a bruised finger? And suppose a doctor has only two shots of morphine left. If he gives one each, it is useless to the more seriously injured man, and minimally alleviates the pain of the less seriously injured man. But if that is the result and given that medication should be determined by relative need, it would appear that the more seriously injured man should receive the two shots, because then the result would be two people whose injuries are more tolerable since medication is applied to where need is greatest.

Of course actual difference in needs is not the only relevant factor here, for it may be the case that even though one man's need is greater the benefit of medication may be of less value to him than it would be to a person with lighter injuries. For instance if a man is bleeding profusely so that death is in any case inevitable and another man though seriously injured, may benefit from the blood transfusion and given again the problem of scarcity, it would appear that the latter has a prima facie case for treatment here.

Inequality of Condition

It is generally agreed that medical facilities are relatively scarce in relation to demand. Therefore some ways of cutting down on demand must be worked out. Something is needed to close the equation between supply and demand. One way of doing this is to charge for medical treatment. Therefore access to medical facilities is now conditioned by available purchasing power to the patient. And since such purchasing power is normally unequal among patients, some of them will receive treatment while others will be deprived of it.

Inequality of merit

There are areas of inequalities that are more complex than those arising out of illness and the like discussed above. The need for education, for example, brings into play far more factors than that arising out of illness. The need for education is not restricted to a particular category of people. The demand is much greater, although those who may qualify for it may not desire, there are many who could not really avail of it because of their inability and yet they ardently seek it in many cases.

Here too, it is necessary to narrow the range of demand, sometime it is done by purchasing power. But precisely because education, unlike illness, presupposes some ability on the part of the candidate, very often access to education is made dependent on some achievement in the form of a public test or examination.

Inequality of Opportunity

Questions of ability alone however by no means exhaust the problem of equality in the context of education. Obviously some people are in a better position to exploit their ability than others. While 'equality of opportunity' may be the slogan, inequality is more the case in life. But what is it? Some argue that equality of opportunity, consists in giving everyone a chance to prove themselves in a common test. The achievement test itself becomes a way of excluding people. But such excluding is not to be deplored. The problem is not that we must create conditions whereby nobody is excluded from the sort and amount of education he desires. For the cost, nature and role of education make such an ideal unrealistic. The real problem consists in determining the sort of exclusion that is discriminatory.

We think one could say that accessibility to education which is directly or indirectly conditioned by such factors as different purchasing power, parental prestige or political position and the like is discriminatory exclusion of others, if not in intent at least in fact. It is a discriminatory exclusion directly if educational opportunity is dependent only on purchasing power and the like. It is indirectly discriminatory if equality of opportunity through achievement is in effect restricted to certain classes by the same means. Thus who have a better primary or secondary education because those with more purchasing power are normally better equipped to take public examinations for higher education. However, this issue is very much tied up with the base social philosophy underlying such a society, a matter we cannot discuss in detail here.

For when we claim the relevance of reasons are not reasons, we are not only saying that nobody should be eliminated on irrelevant grounds. We also realize that the number of relevant reasons is limited. And spelling out these reasons brings to the basis of such societies.

Our main argument against this point of view is not that it is too inclusive but that given the situation, it is practically utopian and may even be socially undesirable even if it were realisable. Certainly no society to our knowledge, under whatever flag, has achieved it. Indeed it may be argued that the attempt to create such conditions may put such a premium on equality of opportunity which are essential to giving meaning to the equality of the human community. Such a quest for an egalitarian society could pave the way for a dehumanized society. Equality of opportunity could so dominate social and political policy that it could destroy initiative and penalize industriousness. Mediocrity is no argument in favour of equality. And the semblance of equality can play havoc with the quality of human living.

It is here that the concept of respect for persons come into reckoning again. Although certain roles and functions do bring certain prestige with them in society it is a pity that such prestige is extended to the person as such for these reasons. What is needed is a way of thinking about man and society where the recognition of different abilities does breed disrespect; where different achievements do not induce opportunism; where different roles do not encourage master-slave relationship.

Reverse Discrimination

So far we have discussed different kinds of titles to similar and differential treatment. But there is a particular form of discrimination known as reverse discrimination. It is claimed to occur when policies of 'ethnic balancing' 'geographical representation, 'social equilibrium' and the like are pursued. More frequently it takes place where educational and job opportunities are concerned.

While it is admitted that total inequality cannot be eradicated and indeed that it may be politically unwise to attempt, nevertheless it is sound policy to aim at minimizing the advantages arising from such inequalities to curb them within a frame of relationships befitting the dignity of all members. But when do policies advocacy of such aims become in effect, forms discrimination.

By reverse discrimination here we mean the exclusion of certain groups of individuals from forms of treatment on grounds that are unrelated to the personnel of a legitimate social policy, to a treatment they could certainly qualify for if they were members of the group preferentially treated by the policy in question. For example if a University allocates 5% of its intake to state A, 5% to state B and 5% to state C leaving the other 85% to the members of the state where the university is located. And the university does this in pursuance of a policy of pluralism within the campus. And

in order to ensure that the allocations are taken, it allows special admission conditions which give them a preference over their categories. Thus many others with better qualifications do not gain admission. In this case of reverse discrimination against the majority is established.

Conclusion

The issue raised by this paper is that although the idea of equality of mankind is accepted by all people, and indeed all the members of the United Nations openly declared for it, yet there is nothing exactly equal in mankind. For people are not all equal in strength, intelligence, ability or courage. Therefore one can be right to say that all men are equal by virtue of their humanity and not that they are equal in all aspects.

In view of this, the paper has examined the idea of equality and humanity, the idea of equality and inequality of circumstances of life. Finally, it discusses 'Reversed Discrimination' as another form of discrimination and inequality amongst people.

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