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A Crisis of Identity

I see a crisis facing the world today. It is fundamentally one of identification. People identify themselves with limited characteristics such as gender, race, religion and nationality, forgetting their basic identity as part of the universal spirit. These limited identifications lead to conflict both globally and on a personal level.

Every individual is much more than the sum of these limited identifications. The highest identification we can have is that we are part of Divinity. Then comes the identity that we are human beings and members of the human family. In divine creation, the whole of the human race is united.

We need to return to the values that are the essence of all major traditions. Religion has three aspects: values, rituals and symbols. Moral and spiritual values are common to all traditions and the symbols and practices — those rituals and customs that form a way of life within a religion — are what distinguish one tradition from another and give each of them their charm! The symbols and practices are like the banana peel and spiritual values, the banana. However, people in every tradition have thrown away the banana and are holding onto the peel.

This distinction, between value, ritual and symbol, was made in ancient times. The Sanskrit term *smriti* refers to those practices that are appropriate to a particular time and place, those things that are time-bound. *Shruti* refers to those values that are timeless.

In the right order of things, what is time-bound is secondary to what is timeless or eternal. However, in all the traditions, we find the order upside down. People tend to honour what is time-bound — symbols and practices — and give them an individual identity more than the values, which are timeless. Then fanaticism flourishes and the differences have to be defended. We can see this today in the wars taking place around the world in the name of religion. If we could focus on values - the larger truth that the symbol and ritual represent, then most of the conflict in the world would be resolved.

Symbols vary between religions because they relate to the relative factors of location, environment and time. The crescent moon and star on the Islamic flag were chosen by people living in a desert region, where evening is a pleasant relief from the scorching heat of the day. The sun was chosen as a religious symbol in Japan and in Tibet, where it gives welcome warmth and a feeling of elevation. Symbols are relative, but they are intended to lead us to something beyond the symbol — to the essence of religion. We need to reach for the deeper values and not be distracted by the apparent differences.

Practices are also time-bound, dictating how you should dress, what name you are to take, what you can eat and how a person should be punished if they make some mistake. In all traditions, you find practices like these that were necessary at the time they were instituted, but may no longer serve a good purpose.

Human values, on the other hand, are social and ethical norms common to all cultures and societies as well as religions. They represent a meeting point for social progress, justice and spiritual growth. Much of the problems that are borne out of religion can be avoided by reintroducing these shared values. It is not necessary to use guilt and fear to promote these values. You will find in the history of all religious systems that guilt and fear were used to control people, but such discipline is not needed today. At this time, we need only to cultivate love and understanding.