

CONCEPT OF A WORSHIPFUL BEING

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FOR ages now, the controversy as to the nature of a worshipful Being is going on. Some say that He is infinite, absolute, without form, eternal, and is inconceivable by the human mind. Others have contended that He is of infinite good qualities, that He has form and though He is all-pervading, He has an abode of His own. Some others again say that He cannot be said to be absolute and infinite, yet He is self-surpassing; yet others give Him a definite form and assert that He can be none other and all other gods are only lesser than Him. Simultaneously a section of humanity has held that there is no such Being at all. It is all a superstition of the frail human mind, of weak persons and should be got over. In the recent centuries this latter view has been gaining ground.

Scientists in the beginning, in the West, were the first to raise the banner of revolt against the then prevailing form of religion and theology there. For the Church at that time, put down, with a firm foot, whatever went against their theological beliefs. Science, therefore, for its very survival had to stage a great fight. Later when the scientists got a free rein to explore their field and ultimately found that science alone could not give peace to mankind, and when contacts with the different religions made it possible to know what was meant by real religion, they discarded this inimical attitude to religion. Nevertheless, the lesser men who call themselves scientists who have as yet contributed nothing either to science or to their own countries are furiously fighting the lost battle. Here, we shall not concern ourselves with these people but limit ourselves to understand the controversy cited at the beginning of this article and enlighten ourselves whether such a controversy is worth the trouble.

II

It is first of all necessary to know as to how this idea of a Being superior to man came to be conceived of in the beginning. The first feeling man experiences, when he comes to know of things, is that he is bound. In the beginning man might have felt the immensity of the power

of Nature, of the elements and therefore personifying them worshipped them, so that they may be propitious to him. So there came to be the worship of the sun, the earth, the fire and water. The earth was worshipped, when man came to depend on cultivation. It was propitiated in order that it may yield crops in plenty. Man felt that these were more free than him and would grant him freedom, when propitiated. Swami Vivekananda says: 'If we try to examine the various sorts of worship all over the world, we would see that the rudest of mankind are worshipping ghosts, demons and the spirits of their forefathers. Serpent worship, worship of tribal gods and worship of the departed ones, why do they do this? Because they feel that in some unknown way these beings are greater, more powerful than themselves, and limit their freedom. They therefore seek to propitiate these beings in order to prevent them from molesting them, in other words, to get more freedom. They also seek to win favour from these superior beings, to get by gift of the gods what ought to be earned by personal effort.'¹ So, we can say that this idea of a superior being or beings originated with the bondage man felt — the moment he began to look around — and the freedom he hankered after; a superior being he thinks would give him unlimited freedom. Even in the crudest concept of God this idea is manifest. To quote Swami Vivekananda again: 'These two views (the ancestor worship and worship of Nature), though they seem to be contradictory, can be reconciled on a third basis, which to my mind is the real germ of religion, and that I propose to call the struggle to transcend the limitations of the senses. Either, man goes to seek for the spirits of his ancestors, the spirits of the dead, that is, he wants to get a glimpse of what there is after the body is dissolved, or, he desires to understand the power working behind the stupendous phenomena of nature. Whichever of these is the case, one thing is certain, that he tries to transcend the limitations of the senses. He cannot remain satisfied with his senses; he wants to go beyond them.'² Later as man evolved and began to think deeply, the idea of God also evolved. God came to be conceived of as a Person, sitting somewhere in the heaven infinitely merciful, infinitely kind, who showers blessings on the good. Many gods gave place to one God, omniscient, and omnipotent. In other words Monotheism became prevalent. Now, most of the religious can not go beyond this idea, though there are indications in their scriptures which point to higher and nobler sentiments.

Well, as it is, it is not bad; we need not blame them. But when they pose to be all-knowers, and dogmatic and begin to condemn every other thought, every other sentiment, every other religion as only worth to be consigned to the dust heap, or flames, we have to pity them for their shallowness; for they are as Christ said: 'Eyes have they but they see not; ears have they but they hear not.'

Further, by these condemnations they not only expose their intolerance of a second creed or religion, other than their own, but also express lack of depth, lack of sympathy, lack of sensitivity, and fear to go

beyond the limitations set by themselves. Let us remind ourselves that these are not things of the past, but of the living present. Dogmatism and fanaticism die hard. If one goes through some of the recent publications of the West and subsequently reproduced in India too, one will find how patent this fact is. Hinduism and India have again become the target of vested interests both in and outside India. This is a thing which cannot but be noted in passing though a detailed survey of it is not necessary in this context.

Now to return to our subject: This idea of a Personal God residing somewhere in the heaven was all right for the common masses but the Hindu seers were not satisfied with such a position. They persisted in their search and advanced further. They said, 'Well, God has an abode but he has an abode in us too, in everyone of us. Nay, we are his parts. Nature also is a part of Him. Just as man has a soul and a body, the whole universe and all the living and non-living beings are his body and He is its soul.' Here people still held on to a Personal God.

But there were seers who were not yet satisfied with the idea. Swami Vivekananda explains why they were not satisfied: 'This explanation — that there is a Being beyond all these manifestations of Maya and who is attracting us towards Himself, and that we are all going towards Him — is very good, says the Vedanta, but yet the perception is not clear, the vision is dim and hazy, although it does not directly contradict reason. . . . The idea that the goal is far off, far beyond nature, attracting us all towards it, has to be brought nearer and nearer, without degrading or degenerating it.'³ The sages, therefore, indomitably struggled on until they came to the last word of Vedanta — Non-dualism, the idea of One without a second. 'The God of heaven becomes the God in nature, and the God in nature becomes the God who is nature, and the God who is nature becomes the God within this temple of the body, and the God dwelling in the temple of the body at last becomes the temple itself, becomes the soul and man — and there it reaches the last words Vedanta can teach.'⁴ This idea, however, is beyond the grasp of most people. If any one says 'You and I are Gods,' or 'Ātman is Brahman', the ordinary man will be shocked at — what he considers — this blasphemy. It is a thought too deep for most of mankind. They will either make a hash of this idea or will simply try to ridicule it. So, we see that every man wants whatever he considers as true to be accepted by everyone else. But we must ask ourselves, when we propound a theory, specially about religion and God: What right have we to condemn others or force them to accept our opinions? Fanatics have no patience to reflect upon this. They will either ask you to follow their pet theories or suffer the consequences. In olden days it was the sword but now it is abuse and vilification. We do not know, how God, who is supposed to be all-love, can remain where so much hatred is rampant.

III

Now, we have so many concepts of God. Which concept is true? What is the way out of this labyrinth of concepts? What must a common man follow? Were the great sages all-wrong? If they were not, whom should one follow? is the common man's dilemma. But to the Hindu, if he had studied his own scriptures, heard his Masters with attention and faith, this should be no problem at all. Even as early as in the times of Rig Veda our sages found out that 'Truth is One but sages call It variously, as Indra, Varuna, and the like.'⁵ By whatever name one called that Supreme Being it was one and the same. Later too we find this idea being again and again repeated and stressed. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* Sri Krishna says, 'One who worships Me (the Lord), in whatever form, to him I come in that form. For, O Arjuna, all people travel everywhere in my path alone.'⁶ A poet sang, 'Men take different paths, straight or crooked through different tendencies, yet, O Lord, Thou alone art the ultimate goal of all men, as ocean is of all rivers.'⁷ Sri Ramakrishna by his intuitive realizations verified this truth and then in his homely inimitable style said: 'Just as water drawn from the different places of a tank by people speaking several languages is variously named, as 'jal', pāni', 'aqua' and 'water', so according to the distinctive tendencies of man, he addresses God, as Brahman, Allah, Krishna, Kali and the like.'

So, it is wrong to be dogmatic about any one concept of God. Those who insist that God can be only what they consider Him to be are consciously or unconsciously dictating terms to God. In what a predicament should that God not be! Do they not consider this overlording Him? If God were such a weak person as to listen to the dictates of a community however large and powerful, He would be no better than the tribal gods conceived of in earlier stages of man's history. Yet, why do people persist in their self-righteous notions? In one word, if we have to say, they are not at all perturbed about God. They are concerned with all other things except Him. So there is conflict and quarrel, dispute and bloodshed, on the outer forms, and modes of worship.

Before dealing with the question, what is the path which one has to choose from among so many concepts, we have to consider one's own nature. Man is man because he can think, why then should he be reduced to the position of dumb driven cattle? The constitution of each man is different. No two persons are exactly alike even in physical appearance. Man comes into this world with loads of tendencies and never with a *tabula rasa*. The very fact that beings are born, say the Indian scriptures, is due to the momentum of past actions or Karma, and accordingly are their temperaments formed. The Hindu scriptures speak of three *gunas* or constituents of Nature, viz. *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, and according as any of these constituents is predominant the nature of man is tranquil, active or inert. For 'as is one's nature so is one's faith. And man's

character develops according to his faith, therefore as is his faith so is man'.⁸ If man has to make real progress he should be allowed to develop in his own way according to his own nature. What another man can do, if possible, is to give him a helping hand in his own way and never by interfering with his ideal or condemning what he has cherished. If one cannot do that and if one is still solicitous for the welfare of that person, what best he can do is to keep off that person's track. What Sri Ramakrishna taught by reprimand and instructions to 'M', the writer of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, can be studied with much benefit towards our spiritual growth. 'M', who had imbibed the idea that image worship is not a proper mode of worship, at the beginning of his contact with the Master came forward to argue that though God may have form, yet 'Certainly He is not the clay image!'

MASTER (*interrupting*): 'But why clay? It is an image of Spirit'.

'M' could not quite understand the significance of this 'image of Spirit'. 'But, sir,' he said to the Master, 'one should explain to those who worship the clay image that it is not God, and that, while worshipping it, they should have God in view and not the clay image. One should not worship clay.'

MASTER (*sharply*): 'That's the one hobby of you Calcutta people — giving lectures and bringing others to the light! Nobody ever stops to consider how to get the light himself. Who are you to teach others?'

By Calcutta people the Master means people who are imbued with the modern ideas. Man will do more harm than good by such interference. Sri Krishna says in the *Gita*, 'Do not create confusion in the minds of the ignorant who are attached to work. For a wise man should encourage them in all work by steadily engaging himself in work.'⁹ By working in an unselfish manner, without any motive man's mind gets purified and in a purified mind values of things become more and more clear until he comes to know the true nature of things. Similarly whatever a person's idea of God may be, he will, if he is sincere, come to the Truth. That is why Sri Ramakrishna said: 'He who is the Lord of the Universe will teach everyone. He alone teaches us, who has created this universe, who has made the sun and moon, men and beasts and all other beings. The Lord has done so many things — will He not show people the way to worship Him? If they need teaching, then He will be the Teacher. He is our Inner Guide.'

IV

What is, therefore, required of man is sincerity and yearning to know God, to see Him. Have we that yearning? Then we are on the right path. Do we do our spiritual practices regularly and systematically? Then there is hope that we shall one day see Him, that we are surely making progress on the path though we may not be aware of it. But mere book

knowledge and parrot-like repetition of scriptures will avail us nothing, take us nowhere. It cannot show us God. The Hindu scriptures openly and boldly avow this: 'Neither by expounding (of scriptures), nor by ratiocination nor by reading a great many Texts can this Ātman be attained. It is attained by him who seeks Him alone. Such a one's soul is illumined by the light of the Lord.'¹⁰ A great significance is attached to the words 'Him alone'. It will not do to seek God as one among the many things you desire. It is no seeking at all. One should seek Him and Him alone. And this means that there should be no other thought in the mind and no other word in the speech except about Him, and no other deed but that which is dedicated to Him. And this should be done not for a day or a year but till realization comes. Can such steadfastness and one-pointedness be attained all of a sudden? By long, continuous and regular practice one gets a little concentration. How much of practice is then not necessary to have this desire to seek 'God alone'? He only truly worships who worships in this manner. Such a person attains Light no matter what form or ideal he worships. Attaining Light himself he becomes a light unto others. So it is not only the concept of God that brings man Light but his devotion to that concept. Swami Vivekananda said that that age will be an ideal one when each person will pursue his ideal of religion alone without any interference whatsoever from anywhere.

Let us understand this thoroughly and shed all inimical attitudes towards other sects, other religions and pursue our own paths with steadfastness and devotion, remembering at the same time that hatred and fanaticism will not lead us anywhere near God. On the other hand, it will take us away from Him. Study the lives of the saints and sages and find out one from among them who had attained that state by hating others. God is all-love. So if we have to worship God we should also become all-loving. Then and then alone our worship will be fruitful.

¹ Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. I, pp. 332, 333. Seventh edition, 1046.

² Ibid., Vol. II, p. 59 (1948).

³ Ibid., p. 128.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rig Veda, 1. 22. 165. 46.

⁶ Bhagavad Gita, 4.11.

⁷ Shivamahimnastotra, 7.

⁸ Bhagavad Gita, 17, 3.

⁹ Ibid, 3.26.

¹⁰ Mundakopanishad, III. ii.3.