

MODERN MAN AND RELIGION

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Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – September 1966; Vol. 53; page 219

I

ONE of the reasons put forward by the modern man with regard to his apathy towards religion is, that it is like a labyrinth which leads you nowhere; where so many sects and philosophies come into conflict, and where each claims pre-eminence for itself; where it is not possible to arrive at anything approaching a universal concept on the metaphysical points such as soul, God and the like. To him this is all confusing and unscientific. Scientists do not quarrel among themselves; they have no two theories about the same phenomenon. If one theory is found to be inadequate in the light of the later researches and discoveries they do not cling to that concept any more but discard it as grounded on insufficient data. But religion, he finds, is not so. The oldest of the discoveries still seem to hold the field and adherents of the several hundreds of sects, of the different religions that are extant, attach themselves to their particular concepts as tenaciously as ever. Modern man notices all this, as also the controversies that go on among the different religions and sects about the supremacy of one or the other particular notion in their philosophies and feels it safe to give a wide berth to religion itself. He thinks religion is mere froth, mere soap bubbles, empty and meant for idle fellows.

What is the concept of the modern man, that we have described here, of himself? He thinks that he is honest in his purpose; that he does not profess to know or believe in a thing which he does not accept wholeheartedly; that before accepting any idea he wants to satisfy his reason. Of course, the first criterion in accepting any idea, for him, would be utility. Of what use is religion? It does not serve any empirical purpose; so discard it. This is his attitude towards religion, being absorbed in his materialistic pursuits, considering them to be the goal of his life. This is one of the types of persons that you come across at present.

There are others who do not close down the shutters of their understanding with as much abruptness as the foregoing. They are open to conviction. Only they want to know that they are not being deceived, that they are treading the right path, that their effort is not going to waste, that they are not like the blind led by the blind. This is a healthier

sign. It is the proper mood with which we have to approach every problem. The Hindu scriptures encourage such a critical attitude and the true teachers invite questions of a genuine seeker. They do not ask any one to accept them or their words without verification, without test. Neither do they fear healthy opposition. And mind you that this is not a new development in the Hindu religion or philosophy. Even as far back as the age of the Upanisads this trend could be seen. No one was taught what was beyond his seeking. None was denied what he genuinely longed for, earnestly sought. The *Praśnopanisad*, for example, is in the form of a dialogue between six pupils and an enlightened teacher. The six disciples, already imbued with the Vedic lore and as such competent to know about the highest knowledge, approached the teacher Pippalada.¹ To them the teacher says, 'Well, I know you have undergone the probationary period of Brahmacharya as required by the scriptures, still I would like you to live with me for a year (as Brahmacharins) and after that you may individually ask me what each one of you desire to know and if I know I shall tell you about it'.² That was the method. There was no arrogation of knowledge to oneself by the teacher. Neither was there any regimentation, no one rule, no one method, no one teaching being forced on all. Besides, in such contact, the disciples were given an opportunity to study the teacher, for themselves, at close quarters. Though they had heard of him, they had never lived with him, and that was no good. The disciple and the master had to know one another intimately. Further, the life of the teacher was an illustration of his teachings. Thus ample scope was provided for the pupil and the teacher to come together by this method, where there was no blind acceptance of the one by the other. So we see that even the approach to religion was scientific, as long back as that.

And what about it now? That it is so even now can be known through the life of Sri Ramakrishna. Once Sri Ramakrishna was explaining a certain point in religion to a devotee when he raised a doubt. Questions and answers followed but the man remained unconvinced. At this some one from the audience suggested to the questioner: 'Why don't you accept what he says?' Sri Ramakrishna could not brook such a notion, the very idea was repugnant to him. He therefore came out with a sharp rebuke on the latter, 'What sort of a man are you,' he said, 'to accept words without conviction! Why, that is hypocrisy! I see you are a counterfeit.'

Let us ponder over this before we say that religion is irrational or unscientific. Why did Sri Ramakrishna insist that one should be convinced before one accepted his words? He had not read logic nor heard about the Western philosophers' points of view. Yet he was insistent that one should not accept a man's words before being convinced of their truth. We can presume several reasons. First of all, it was the Hindu tradition to inquire

¹ Prasna Up., 1.1

² Ibid., 1.2.

and know, as Sri Krishna says in the Gītā: 'Know that by prostration and by inquiry'. Prostration here does not merely mean the physical action but earnestness of the seeker and humility required of it. Secondly, Sri Ramakrishna could visualize the trend of the future age, the age of rationality, and his message being one which was meant not only for the particular times in which he lived but also for future mankind, he had to meet the needs of the inquirers to come. Thirdly, and this is more important for a seeker to know, Sri Ramakrishna knew that those who accepted words without conviction were shallow, were as ready to fall off as they were ready to follow. They, he found, were like trees whose roots do not go deep into the earth but spread just near the surface and are uprooted by a wind, which approaches the nearest sign of a storm. He had no sympathy with such superficial inquirers. He wanted people to dive deep into religious practices, a condition which was not possible for anyone unless he had conviction of the veracity and validity of the truths he was seeking. So the sincerity of purpose and honesty of conviction of the modern man were not unknown to the ancients. These were the first fundamentals of the religious. They are not the modern man's monopoly. These traits were, are and will be cherished by all true seekers in whatever line their search might be.

Now let us see whether the modern man is scientific in condemning that religion is unscientific and so on. Honest scientists do not reject a theory unless it is proved to be false; this is the attitude of science towards its own investigations. Would it then have one set of attitude towards their research and another towards a different field? If so, it is unreasonable, illogical. In such a case biased judgment will be the result. People of the world today suffer because of this dual standard of judgment; it has one standard for the mother-in-law and another for the daughter-in-law, as the native proverb goes. But rationalism and science cannot claim to remain as such, if those who profess these ideologies too have this double standard.

Further, science does not say that what it has achieved is final and that there can be no other fields for exploration. On the contrary it has been forced to admit that man's psyche and mind are things which are beyond the scope of exact sciences. So under the circumstances though one may not practise religion one has no right to vilify it without verifying its statements and propositions, if he wants to remain scientific in his outlook as he asserts himself to be.

Some of these modern men describe taking to religion as escapism. What do they mean by that? Escaping from what? Escaping from responsibility? If so, of what? To whom is man responsible? Of course, to father and mother he owes a duty. Suppose they are not dependent upon him, then to whom is he responsible? Do they mean that he is afraid to face the world? One who renounces is ready to face the world without anything to call his own. So this accusation too falls flat. Perhaps, they mean that he does not become one more competitor in the race for

accumulation of wealth. If that be the meaning of the word, indeed he is guilty of escapism. Otherwise, in no other sense can he be accused of it. On the contrary, what do we see in the world today? 'Each one for himself and devil take the hindmost,' this seems to be the motto and policy of the majority of people. Selfishness and grabbing at what one can lay one's hands upon are the prevailing trends in society. That each one of us has a duty to society is conveniently forgotten by most. So when such people impute escapism to the religious, one does not know what to say; one is simply amused. Jesus said, 'Why seek ye the mote in your brother's eye? Why not you see the beam that is in your own?' But sane advice like this is given the go by. Why? Because the path of self-abnegation is hard and the way of self-indulgence is easy. Also, one cannot see one's own defects unless one be introspective; the whole creation is on this plan. It always presents the objective side, the subjective part is never revealed unless the doors of the mind which lead inwards are thrown open.

II

After having discussed the short-sightedness and the summary manner in which religion is dealt with in the present age, let us see whether there is any substance in the contention that there are too many theories and too many philosophies in the world and that they only baffle man. We have to remember that religious or spiritual life is mostly dependent on the mental development. And the development of the mind in all people is not the same. None can deny this. It is so obvious. It is the beauty of Nature that it provides you with variety. Even in the human body it has placed differences of colour, height, girth, features and so on. It provides varieties in the animal and plant life too. As it is in the external world, so it is regarding the internal world of man. If it were the plan of Nature that there should be one type of mind it would have done so. Fortunately that has not been its scheme. It has provided variations in the inner world too. Man is neither all reason nor all emotion. He is a combination of both. Only there is predominance of reason in some and in others it is the emotion which takes the upper hand. Therefore it is that the different minds require different types of incentives to develop in their own way. Take for instance the worldly secular occupations. There are so many vocations but all are not efficient to practise any and every trade they come across. There is the aptitude of each person. One may be proficient in mechanics, another may easily master economics. If, however, we were to enforce them to change over their vocations, to which they have no aptitude, we may find that either they will not be able to work so well or will be complete failures. As in the case of the trades so also in man's inclination towards religion there are differences. The Hindu idea has been to meet the needs of all. You will cripple man's development if you force him to change his nature, by not allowing him to develop in his own way, by setting one standard for all.

The real spiritual guide does not disturb the nature of the disciple but helps him to overcome the obstacles in his path. He attempts no transplantation. Try to transplant a grown-up tree, what will be the result? The tree will die. Make the fish live out of water, the same result will follow. So each one has to be nurtured in his own element. We cannot make the tropical vegetation grow in temperate climates. Do we not remember the saying: One man's meat is another man's poison? This is what Sri Ramakrishna too gave us to understand when he cited the instance of a mother cooking various dishes of the same fish to suit the digestive power of her several children. We find from the annals of religion that there is not one path alone to reach the Godhead. We see there are many religions and every religion has produced saints and sages, and that in spite of the several attempts on the part of the followers of some religions, to wipe out other religions from the face of the earth, the seemingly most meek among them, viz., Hinduism, has still survived. Not only has it survived by itself but it has given religion, all the world over, a new fillip, a new lease of life, whenever it was in danger of being smothered by antagonistic forces. Vain are the efforts of those who want to convert the whole world to their own way of thinking, to their own ideology; it is against the very scheme of the Most High whom they adore.

III

Now then, having found that variety in religious beliefs and practices are nothing abnormal but natural, let us try to comprehend the fundamentals of religion. The first thing that every religion accepts, except perhaps Buddhism and Jainism, is that there is a higher power, by whatever name He is addressed, from whom this universe has come, in whom it rests and unto whom it will finally return; that He is seeking man, as man seeks Him. Secondly, the way to know God, see Him, is by self-abnegation, by giving up our desires for enjoyment here or hereafter. As Jesus said, 'No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon'.³ Hence, desires for enjoyment and religion cannot go hand in hand. One has to give up the one or the other. Again, self-abnegation means cultivation of several other virtues like humility, compassion, forgiveness, etc., which are its corollaries. Thirdly, an intense desire to know the Lord must be present. Every religion lays stress on these fundamentals and to attain this goal it has evolved methods, peculiarly its own.

Religion has three aspects: rituals, philosophy and mythology. People nowadays think lightly of the rituals. But for a sense-bound man they serve as a safety valve, serve to divert his mind from himself to the

³ Gospel according St. Mathew, 6.24.

Deity. We shall give here an instance to illustrate how this ritual works. Girish Chandra Ghosh, when he came to Sri Ramakrishna, was leading a bohemian life. Even after coming in contact with the Master he could not give up his drinking habit. Several devotees of the Master, who saw many good virtues in Girish, requested the Master to ask Girish to give up that habit. Sri Ramakrishna's only reply was, 'No, I need not ask him to do so. He will give it up of himself'. A few days later Girish expressed to the Master his difficulty in giving up drinking. Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Why should you give up? Only offer the wine to the Divine Mother before you partake of it'. Girish followed the instructions and before long wine lost all its attraction for him. The beauty of offering everything to God, before we partake of it, is that we lose the enormous attraction that we have for the object. The thirst gradually abates and finally God becomes the centre of all our attraction. But let it not be thought that everyone has to go through this path of rituals. Those who are competent to get over the body idea can directly take to the path of knowledge. But they are few and far between.

The next aspect of religion is philosophy which deals with the nature of the ultimate reality and how it can be reached. However, truths of philosophy being obscure, abstract, we have mythology in religion, which by stories and illustrations makes the common man understand those truths. No part of religion, therefore, is to be looked down upon. Each serves its purpose in the release of man from his servitude to the senses. Those who desire this release have to take to religion whether they call themselves modern or not.