

RELIGION AND FANATICISM (*)

Swami Paratparananda

* Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – April 1963; Vol. 49; page 490

Religion, to most people all the world over, consists in belief in some doctrines, in some personalities, in some creeds, and at the most doing good to members professing the same faith or with the hope of getting them converted to their faith. Beyond that they cannot think. This position is understandable in the case of persons of the common run. But it is intriguing when people who profess to live for religion and religion alone also run along the same ruts. By this they not only do harm to themselves but lead their flock intentionally and deliberately astray.

There was a time when these narrow conceptions would not have affected even the fringe of humanity. But now, on account of the vast network of communications, when the world has dwindled in size, as it were, all caution is to be observed when we say things which fail to carry conviction with the rational man of today, or vilify persons, or faiths. Not that the religion or persons thus vilified lose anything of their vitality or influence but the vilifiers themselves expose their ignorance of the trend of events, their insularity, and warped way of thinking, and also do harm to the cause of religion as a whole, by such an attitude. There have been criticisms in certain quarters that 'Vedantins do not know God, as the Transcendent One, the Creator.' We shall endeavour here to show how totally misunderstood, misrepresented and biased this saying is.

What is Religion?

In this connection first of all it is incumbent on us to know: What religion is, and what our conception of God is. At the very outset we may say, that religion is a way of life that leads us onwards towards God, helps to discover our true nature. This is the elementary definition. In this sense, in Sanskrit, it is called *dharma*. However, this word *dharma* has got different meanings according to the different contexts. It means duty, righteousness, morality, inherent nature, and religion according to usage. Yet it can be seen that all through the several meanings the main purport of the word is not lost sight of. Other meanings are stages for the final end, religion. Duty well done clears vision, ensures righteousness, perfects nature and finally instils conviction regarding the purpose of life.

That is what religions try to do. And about this there is no dispute.

It is also true that almost all religions accept that the soul continues to live after the death of the body. This too is the common ground where there is no disputation. Most religions positively affirm that the soul either goes to a heavenly abode or is condemned to hell, — whatever may be the description of the hell or heaven given by them. Thus the aim of all religions is to elevate the brute in man to a higher pedestal, the human. We are deliberately abstaining from the use of any other epithet, at present, in this context, lest that word should frighten some who cannot view man except as a conglomeration of mind and body. And to lift man from the lower to a higher level a variety of creeds and paraphernalia, symbols and insignia, were introduced by various sages, seers, prophets and Incarnations, to suit the variegated types of humanity. From this it naturally follows that creeds or dogmas are not the whole of religion; neither does mere philosophy or learning constitute it. These are only the pathways to the Highest.

In other words attaining perfection, freedom is the goal of religion. Everything in the world works for freedom knowingly or unknowingly. Evolution of species which had once upset the religious moorings in the West, the Vedanta explains as the proof of the involved soul trying to attain more and more freedom. It is not the matter, dead and inert, that does it but the soul behind it. This is the difference between the living and the dead, that while in the living there is struggle for more and more freedom, in the dead it is all bondage. Swami Vivekananda says: 'This effort to attain freedom underlies all forms of worship, whether we know it or not.' Wherever we find worship, — in howsoever rudimentary form it may be, howsoever crude it may appear to us — there is that desire to obtain more freedom, by propitiating what the worshippers believe as higher and more powerful beings. 'This longing for freedom' remarks Swami Vivekananda, 'produces the idea of a Being who is absolutely free.' This Being who is eternally pure, eternally free, omniscient, and omnipotent is called God. And He is the basic of religion.

Man's concept of God, however, is diverse. Notwithstanding the divergent views regarding God, that there need be no fight over it has been amply proved in recent times by Sri Ramakrishna, by his practice of the disciplines and realizations of the ultimate of those very sects and religions which were considered inimical to one another. At the end of these practices he attained the same goal. Variety need not frighten us. Because there is a unity underlying this variety. Religion anywhere means attaining the Most High. When we have reached It, then only we have religion worth the name. That is why Swami Vivekananda repeatedly said, 'Religion is realization and not learning or argument.' This is the primary meaning of religion. All else is secondary or even tertiary. Have we realized God? Then we have religion. Do we at least attempt to reach Him? Then we are on the path of religion. Mere denunciation or condemnation of another is not religion. Nevertheless, we more often than

not, behave like the blind men who went to find out how an elephant looked. Each touching some one part of that animal, described it as a pillar, a rope, a winnowing fan and the like. Likewise people with prejudiced minds refuse to concede that God can be anything except what they think Him to be. Is God, who they profess is all-powerful, and all-knowing, so small that they can know all of Him with their little minds? But that is exactly what most people are doing. They want to put a ban, as it were, on Him from being anything else. They must be thinking themselves more powerful and wiser than God, for who else can dictate terms, to others than a person more powerful than them. Such a proposition by its incongruity will make even a man in the street laugh.

Vedantin's Concept of God

What is the Vedantin's concept of God? The Vedantin says: God is *Sat-Chit-Ananda* (Existence-Knowledge-Bliss). Existence that is eternal, knowledge that is infinite, and Bliss that is endless. Even we exist because of that Existence. He is the essence of our knowledge, and even the highest happiness a man enjoys in this world is an infinitesimal fraction of that Bliss. Further, the Vedanta says, 'From whom these beings are born, in whom these created beings live; towards whom they all hasten and into whom they all enter again, know that. That is Brahman.'¹ This is not a solitary instance where the Upanisads try to infuse into us this idea. In the Chandogya Upanisad there is the injunction 'All this is verily Brahman; meditate on It with a calm mind, knowing this to have been come out of It, merges in It, and has its station in It.'²

Many more passages can be quoted in support of the theory of Vedanta that this world has come out of Brahman, God; but these are sufficient to convince the critics of Vedanta, if they keep an open mind, and to see for themselves the depth of their folly. As the saying goes, one man may lead a horse to the water but ten cannot make it drink, so in case people have shut the doors of their mind and are determined not to be convinced no one can help them. A sleeping man can be awakened but not one who is pretending sleep.

Where Vedanta Excels

Vedanta says that the inner core of our being, the life of our life, the soul of our soul is God, is Brahman. Very few can understand this even intellectually. They are frightened when Vedanta boldly asserts that divinity is man's birthright. It is his heritage. Only he has forgotten it. A beautiful illustration has been given in one of the Upanisads to bring home this truism. 'All beings experience this Brahman every day in their state of deep sleep (when the real nature reigns supreme by itself). Yet like the person who is heir to immense wealth, though walking over the place where the gold is hidden, does not attain it, being ignorant of its

existence, so also man, whose real nature, which is Brahman, covered by ignorance in the form of desires (such as hunger, lust and the like), does not know it though daily he goes into (experiences) it.'³

What a wonderful concept of man is placed before us by Vedanta: 'Heirs of Immortality.'⁴ With these words Swami Vivekananda introduced the concept of man according to Vedanta to the audience at one of the sessions of the Parliament of Religions. 'Enough,' said he to the people of India, 'have we been fed by negative ideas. Rise up, be heroes. The divine is in you. Manifest it.' Does a son of an aristocrat, if he knows it, cringe before others for some paltry things? This is the excellent idea Vedanta teaches us.

We are very familiar with our birth-rights; we fight and stake our all in litigation in order to prove our rights, or demand our heritage. But the most precious of all our heritage, our own Atman, we forget to claim and beggar ourselves for a petty this or a paltry that. We cling to our body as the *alpha* and *omega* of our life. This clinging to our false personality is the bane of man. As he believes himself to be a person possessed of body and mind and nothing more than that, he wants to see his God too as a person. Vedanta does not say it is wrong. It even encourages this concept. For it knows that as soon as the man has his perfected nature manifesting itself in him, he will be no more narrow and bigoted. We are reminded here how Sri Ramakrishna taught this lesson to 'M', the writer of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. 'M' had come to Dakshineswar for the second time. Being educated in the Western sciences he was rationalistic in his outlook. 'M' thought that the people who worshipped images should be asked to have God in view while they did so and should not worship clay or stone. The Master's sharp rebuke on that occasion stilled 'M's' nature of arguing for ever. Sri Ramakrishna said: '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?

'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; who has provided means for their sustenance; who has given children parents and endowed them with love to bring them up. 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.

'Suppose there is an error in worshipping the clay image; doesn't God know that through it He alone is being invoked? He will be pleased with that very worship. Why should you get a headache over it? You had better try for knowledge and devotion yourself.'

To those who will hear, Vedanta has something more to give. It says your real nature is Brahman: 'That thou art.'

Misapprehension about Vedanta

The real misapprehension starts here, at this stage. How can that infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent Being be said to have become limited in a cage of flesh and bones? What further blasphemy can there be than this? Ask those to whom this is a strange, and fantastic idea. We all know how even an intellectual giant, like Swami Vivekananda, with a religious bent of mind even from the birth, so to say, at the beginning of his spiritual career had difficulty in accepting, nay rebelled against this concept: 'All this is Brahman'; we also know how the Master brought home this truth to his beloved disciple by his mystic touch; and how later on Swamiji himself scaled the dizzy heights of this realization. No wonder then that if people who are not brought up in the tradition fail to grasp the import of the passage and prattle in their own way. However, if there is a genuine desire to know, if there are not the preconceived ideas to obstruct, hamper and mutilate their vision, it is not so difficult to understand this grand notion, intellectually at least. By this we do not mean that every one should become a Vedantin. It is not possible. Being fully aware of the fact that all men are not of identical taste and mental development, the Vedas themselves have prescribed, such things as sacrifices to prepare man for the highest end. Now what the Vedantin asks of all is not to be dogmatic, when they say man is this or that, when they want to say that God is such and such. Remember the saying 'in my father's house are many mansions'; we may be living in one and our brothers in a second and a third. Should we on that account hate or despise those who live in other mansions? The Vedantin has no quarrel with anyone except bigots and fanatics who are out to kill the spirit of religion itself.

Real Import of the Mahavakyas

Now let us understand what is the actual meaning of the mahavakyas which are of so confusing a nature: *Tattvamasī, Aham Brahmasmi* etc. First of all, if we know to whom those truths were taught in the days gone by, much of the cloudiness and mistiness which enshrouds our understanding will clear away. Of yore the disciples, at a very impressionable age, sought the teacher, lived with him, served him and learnt from him, as well as by his life. That was the mode of teaching then. The teacher knew the student thoroughly, his propensities, his aptitudes, his intellectual acumen and more than that his spiritual potentials.

In the *Prasnopanisad* there is a story. Six disciples approach a sage named Pippalada seeking knowledge. The sage asks the disciples: 'Live again here observing austerities, chastity, with shraddha and serving the guru for a year more. After that ask questions on subjects which each of you desire to know, I shall answer, if I happen to know them.'⁵ This was

the method of approach: To teach what one desired to know.

Thus the flint would be getting ready by discipline under the teacher and when the opportune moment came the teacher struck, and the fire of knowledge was kindled. When this ground had been prepared, when the disciple was thoroughly tested and found fit, he was taught the highest truth. So 'That thou art' or 'I am Brahman' does not mean that the individual who is called Mr. So and So is Brahman. To understand these great teachings in this manner would be disastrous to one's spiritual life. An example of this perverted understanding is also presented to us in the *Chandogya Upanisad* in the form of a story, as a fore-warning.

Once Prajapati (the Creator) announced, 'the Atman, which is untouched by impurity, devoid of old age, deathless, griefless, not liable to hunger and thirst, whose desires come true, whose thoughts come true, is to be sought after, is to be known. One who understands It having been taught (by a teacher), obtains all the worlds and all desires.'⁶

Hearing about it Indra among the gods and Virochana among the demons approached Prajapati with due respect and after living for sometime and serving Him requested Him to teach them that highest knowledge. Prajapati said: 'The Purusa that is seen in the eye that is the Atman. This is immortal, fearless. This is Brahman.'⁷ They asked which was the Atman, that which was reflected in the mirror or that which was reflected in water. Prajapati first asked them to see as they were in water and again after adorning themselves with ornaments etc. Being still not of the required purity of mind, they could not assess the meaning of these instructions of Prajapati. Describing the reflection each time they asked whether that as the Atman that he meant. Prajapati only repeated his previous formula 'This is the Atman, This is Immortal, fearless. This is Brahman.'

Pleased at heart both of them went away thinking that they had known all. Prajapati seeing them go away satisfied said; 'They are going away without understanding the Self. But whoever goes away, whether gods or demons, without understanding this knowledge will perish.'⁸

Of the two Virochana firmly believed that what Prajapati meant by Atman was the body, and went away perfectly satisfied and taught his followers to build up their bodies. But Indra being a little more thoughtful doubted this doctrine and approaching again and again, learnt the real import of Prajapati's teaching. Now who was responsible for Virochana's fault? His own lack of reflectiveness, lack of introspectiveness. So, if some in the world even in the present day cannot understand the true import of these great teachings or thoroughly and purposefully misunderstand them, the Srutis are not at fault, neither the teacher who imparts the teachings, but those people themselves.

Body, mind and soul

The Hindu concept is that man has a body and a mind. This

difference becomes more explicit if we take an example. When a person dies the Hindu says he has given up the body. This usage is significant. Here it is clear that the Hindu considers this body as an instrument of the soul. When the soul had worked out the usefulness of the body it discards that one and takes another. Thus it transmigrates from body to body until it reaches that perfection, which is its inherent nature. Then the soul is said to have been liberated. This element which is apparently shifting its centre time and again, is called the Atman by Vedanta. We have now two, rather three things that go to form 'man': the body, the mind and the soul. Out of these the first two are, say our scriptures, material in composition; body is made of gross matter and mind of subtle matter. Soul is the essence of man and being of the nature of consciousness it makes the body live, move and have its being. This is the preliminary stage of Vedanta. Sruti believes in the gradual progress of man, leading him from 'lower truth to higher truth'. Just as a few only can stand the sudden and extreme changes in climate, so too, very few can sustain the shock of sudden transformation. It is also true that all cannot climb to the storey of a building by pole-vaulting, many require the staircase. This is the plan of the Upanisads also.

Now, the second stage is that the Atman (the self or the Soul) is a part of the infinite Brahman, of God. 'As from a blazing fire myriads of sparks identical in appearance fly out similarly from this Immutable varied beings are born and again absorbed into it,'⁹ says the Sruti. If and when people come to distinguish between their Self and body, this theory will not be so hard to digest. And then, the words like 'Heirs of Immortality', 'each soul is potentially divine', may not sound so bewildering. On the other hand there is every possibility that people who were first frightened at these words will understand them (now) in the clearer context.

But the aim of the scriptures is not to have a half-way house. They stand for truth, and truth does not depend on anybody's acceptance or rejection of it. The law of gravitation was there and would have been there even if Newton had not found it out. Sruti then goes on to the final stage. It asserts: 'All this is Brahman.' 'There are not many things in this world.' 'That Thou Art.' These are the teachings which preach the identity, rather unity in the variety. No doubt, this is a big leap into the Unknown, only not into the dark but into light. Few are fit to achieve it, but on that account we have no right to demean it. 'Accept all ideals as true, but stick to your own,' said Sri Ramakrishna. If we follow this advice there arises no necessity to pass strictures on others' views.

Religion is not Fanaticism

Finally it is not to be forgotten that dogmatism, bigotry and fanaticism have nothing to do with religion. There is a vast gulf of difference between the former three and the latter. Fanaticism is incompatible with true religion. Swami Vivekananda pointed out, 'Fanatics

cannot work, they waste three-fourths of their energy. It is the level-headed, calm, practical man who works.' Again on other occasions he remarked, 'These fanatics may do some good, according to their light, but much more harm.' Bringing out the childish impishness dominant in fanaticism Swamiji said: 'When I was a boy I thought fanaticism was a great element in work, but now, as I grow older, I find out that it is not.'

An incident in Swamiji's life, which he related to an audience in the West, brings out the meaning of fanaticism clearly: 'I had a book sent me, which said I must believe everything told in it. It said there was no soul, but that there were gods and goddesses in heaven, and a thread of light going from each of our heads to heaven! How did the writer know all these things? She had been inspired, and wanted me to believe it too, and because I refused, she said, "You must be a very bad man; there is no hope for you!" This is fanaticism.' What a toll of human life fanaticism has taken can be best known from history. 'Fanatics make only hatred.' warned Swamiji. History has proved this. Rivers of innocent blood have flown on this earth, inquisitions have been held and all this was done for fanaticism's sake. Can real religion have anything to do with these things? Religion preaches, 'love thy neighbour as thyself' and what does fanaticism do, quite the reverse. Let us, therefore eschew fanaticism from our midst and learn to live amicably.

¹ Taittiriyaopaniṣad, 3-1.

² Chandogya, III.14.1.

³ Ibid.VIII.3.2.

⁴ Svetasvatara Upaniṣad,2.5.

⁵ Prasna Up., 1.2.

⁶ Chandogya Up., 8.7.1.

⁷ Ibid., 8.7.4.

⁸ Ibid., 8.8.4.

⁹ Mundaka Up., 2.1.1.