

RELIGIONS AND SPIRITUALITY

RELIGII ȘI SPIRITUALITATE

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Abstract

Mysteries of life have always fascinated human mind. Some sort of divine presence emerged as a human answer to these unintelligible riddles of our existence which were interpreted and named differently by different societies giving birth to multiple religions. Gradually the religious beliefs turned into blind faith and were confined within the narrow walls of rituals and rigid structures. Thus the religions that were born as a result of human quest for the truth have now become a hurdle in the very path of search for the truth. Moreover the very religions that are supposed to guide humanity to virtuous behaviour with tolerance and compassion have become a source of conflict and blood-shed due to competition for superiority and power. It is therefore time to rise above the narrow walls of religious rituals, rigid structures and blind faith. Critical thinking and scientific reasoning can be of considerable help in this journey towards spirituality to overcome religious conflicts due to blind faith.

Key Words: *riddles of life, blind faith, scientific reasoning, critical thinking, frog of a well, ideology, individual freedom, virtuous behaviour*

Genesis: Curiosity is innate in human nature. From the earliest times, humans have looked around and above them and wondered about the world, the universe and the meaning of life. Thus the riddles surrounding the origin of nature and life have been a subject of immense curiosity and fascination since antiquity. At least once in a while in our lifetime each one of us must have thought with awe and wonder of this magnificent creation surrounding us while gazing at the vast blue sky at night studded with millions of stars and waning and waxing moon. What is this universe? How did it come into existence? Who regulates it? Was it created by somebody? If so, who created the creator? How did millions of life forms come into existence -- each with so different attributes. How do they reproduce themselves to keep the movement of life in perpetuity? Who am I? How did I come into existence? What happens after death? Why some of us are born in extreme poverty and deprivation while some others in palaces surrounded with luxuries of life? These are mind boggling questions that have been agitating the minds of the humanity since times immemorial. Intellectuals as well as ordinary mortals have all engaged themselves in the pursuit of unraveling these mysteries of life and existence. These puzzles of our existence and the power of nature often defies and transcend the boundaries of human intellect. This has given rise to belief in some sort of divine presence interpreted and named differently by different societies leading to multiple doctrines and theories. Originally this gave birth to spiritual thinking in the quest for truth. However slowly this quest for truth was walled and narrowed down to rigid structures and rituals. Thus, religions emerged as a human answer to the **unintelligible riddles** of our existence.

Religions: The word religion comes from the Latin root 'religio' which means 'to bind together'. Origin of most religions lie in the teachings of a saint often called as prophet or messenger or incarnation of God. Followers of these teachings have catapulted them into revelations or divine edict reducing them to writing in the form of a holy book - in most cases hundreds of years after the death of the saint. Thus in modern parlance religion is normally interpreted as an organized mode of life which brings a group of people together based on certain beliefs, revelations or a collection of such revelations in the form of a book. Overtime enthusiastic followers jealously promoted blind faith and belief into these writings. All possible tactics were used to do so - forcible conversions, corporal punishment, social sanctions, religious edicts and economic incentives. Today the blind belief has become so strong and rigid that even a genuine debate on any part of these writings is considered blasphemy inviting harsh punishment even death. Religions have become highly structured with a central code of commandments, rigid principles defining good and bad and plethora of rituals and social conduct leaving hardly any freedom of choice to the individuals. Religions have taken the form of an ideology and a power centre. Thus what was originally an individual's quest for the truth and his personal faith in the divine; has evolved as an ideological power-house with rigid principles, rituals and blind faith. Today most individuals have become prisoners of such religious power structures. Even before they are born; religious structures take over deciding their way of life. A human being is not born any more. What is born is a Hindu, a Christian, a Muslim or a Jew. Individual freedom of belief, enquiry and rational thinking have been completely sub-ordinated.

Fundamentally **the primary purpose of all religions** is to guide an individual to the path of righteousness. If we look at the life of the saint, the messenger or the prophet behind each of the religions, this core message comes out very clearly. In effect these saints or prophets never founded any of the religions as they exist today. They only conveyed the message of righteousness, peace, tolerance and virtuous behaviour. Religions as they exist today were founded by their followers hundreds of years later. Their fortress has become stronger and stronger over time. How correctly the original message has been reflected in these rituals and structures is a matter of conjecture as these books, rituals and structures are considered sacred and unassailable. Today, due to the prescriptive nature of most religions and the rituals; religions are often seen as a hurdle in the path of truth, righteousness and virtuous behaviour rather than their facilitator. The quest for the truth has come to an end with blind faith and prescriptive behaviour. Religious structures are being used to dictate human life. What an irony – the messages of the saints designed for search of truth has actually become an instrument to forbid that very search.

Thus cutting across countries, cultures and societies religions are promoting the mentality of a frog in a well. As Swami Vivekananda said and I quote "I am a Hindu. I am sitting in my own little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christian sits in his little well and thinks the whole world is his little well. The Mohammedan sits in his little well and thinks that is the whole world" (Address to the World Parliament of religions, Chicago, 1893). This very mentality of the frog of a well is the source of friction leading to many conflicts and wars that can be seen across the world today. Religions are expected to guide the humanity to the path that nurtures love, harmony, tolerance, forgiveness, and compassion leading to equality and unity of human race. On the contrary very often; religious institutions, teachings and rituals are being used for dividing human race; spreading hatred, sectarianism and extremism.

Vying for supremacy and power many such religious institutions are engaged in misleading people, igniting religious conflicts and wars causing blood-shed. Such conflicts can be seen in

several parts of the world today. Isn't it an irony that no religion teaches hatred, intolerance, cruelty and killing still religion is often used as a pretext for spreading hatred, perpetrating cruelty and killing of innocents? One must ponder whether they could be called religious teachings? Commenting on the differences and inequalities created by the religious institutions, Swami Vivekananda said, "Religion has no business to formulate social laws and insist on the difference between beings, because its aim and end is to obliterate all such fictions and monstrosities" (Address to the World Parliament of religions, Chicago, 1893).

We therefore need harmonization of the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran and other scriptures. Mankind ought to be taught that religions are but the varied expressions of **oneness**, so that each may choose the path that suits him best. To be good and to do good to others – is essence of all religion. One can choose any path, worship any god and in any form but the sole purpose must be to promote tolerance for diversity, individual freedom, love and harmony. This is the true and only worship of God. All the rest is nothing but power projection and ideology. Therefore we need to rise above rituals and become spiritual. The message of tolerance, peace, harmony, love and compassion must replace the rituals and structures of religions. This is the need of the hour. The following three steps can help us in promoting this path.

Scientific Reasoning and Critical Thinking: Search for the truth through debate and discussion forms an integral part of human freedom. As soon as we resort to blind faith the journey towards truth comes to an end. Humans are inherently good and have been endowed with faculties of mind and intellect and therefore the truth must be established based on scientific reasoning and critical thinking. Various religions have to be seen in the light of this universal truth. Blind faith in religious writings without understanding the underlying body of knowledge is a dangerous trend. This trend is leading to ignorance, religious extremism, sectarian wars and intolerance. In essence the religions are an expression of the truth in different names and forms. Unfortunately, over time these names and forms have given rise to many differences in beliefs, practices and rituals. Varying interpretations of the scriptures have further multiplied these beliefs, practices and rituals. If the religions are not to contradict each other, then we need some sort of reconciliation of their beliefs, practices and rituals. This can only be done through critical thinking and informed reasoning. For example if you believe that the God is all-powerful and omnipresent how could you confine Him to a temple, a mosque or a church and then create a conflict between these institutions and their followers. If He is considered almighty and omnipresent He must be present in every single particle of the Universe. Similarly if the God is one; He could not be different in different religions, though He may be called by different names in different religions and cultures depending on their language and history. The name and form must not become a source of conflict so long as the this refers to the same all powerful entity. Based on the same analogy, if you consider God as the creator of all living beings, all of them must be treated with respect and equality. We must not treat others as inferior and impose our beliefs on them through forcible conversions or subordination. Their freedom to choose must be respected. Similarly we must respect other species of life. Therefore scientific reasoning and critical thinking can restore some sanity over extremism and intolerance which have fueled conflicts and wars in many parts of the world. A famous Vedic Hymn states,

As the different streams having their sources in different places, all mingle their water in the sea, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee. (Swami Vivekananda, 2003)

Unity and Diversity: Unity and diversity are two opposite looking forces. Critical thinking will enable us to understand that all diversity arises out of unity. The Rig-Veda states that “*ekam sat vipra bahuda vadanti*” (एकम् सत् विप्राः बहुधा वदन्ति) meaning - the ultimate truth is one; wise pronounce it by different names (Rig-Veda). This reality of life can be observed in practice by all in a variety of ways. Out of clay one can make millions and billions of different objects (including a church, a temple and a mosque). In essence they are nothing but clay in different forms and names. Out of cotton we make millions of different clothing with different names, forms and sizes. In essence they are nothing but cotton in different names and forms. Millions of different ornaments are made from gold. All of them have different names and forms. Even the same ornament could have many different names depending on the place, time and language. Nevertheless they are nothing but gold. If you go to a goldsmith to sell any one of them, he will not look at the form (shape and size) but the value of gold. Twenty eight alphabets in English language do create a large dictionary containing thousands of word and these multiple words create millions of books. The same earth, water, air and sunlight gives birth to millions of different plants and vegetation.

Thus scientific reasoning allows us to understand that all pluralism and diversity arises from unity. While the initial part of this diversity arises through the natural processes in the form of natural fibres, minerals, plants and so on; the subsequent multiplication takes place due to human intervention. This principle holds true in all aspects of life. Therefore we need to understand the unity behind diverse forms and names that exist in this world. While all the 7 billion human beings inhabiting the Planet Earth are different from each other, the same consciousness resides in each one of us. This very consciousness is responsible for our birth, survival and growth. We therefore need to understand the source rather than its different manifestations. Such an understanding will promote tolerance for diversity, harmony with nature, and love and respect for others.

Oneness: Like the space, air and energy the universe is one single entity -- harmoniously interconnected. According to the *Taittiriyaopnishad*, whatever reality is in existence by which all the rest subsists, is Brahman (Gupta, 2014 pp.32). Depending on the language and religious structure Brahman could be equated to Abraham, Jesus or Allah – the one single omnipresent power. He is an eternal behind all instabilities and a constant which supports all mutations. He is hidden in all appearances and forms. Although I have used the word He, Brahman has no gender. He is neither male nor female. Since He is hidden in all appearances and forms, He is male in a male, female in a female, child in a child, bird in a bird and animal in an animal. In this sense Brahman is akin to space which turns into a house, a playground, a shopping mall, a factory, a theatre or a stadium depending on the structure and use. Space exists in all these forms as well as outside of these forms. Similarly, Brahman exists in all forms and appearances as well as outside of them (Gupta, 2014 pp.32). In modern language this is called oneness. Essentially it means – all in one or *Isha vasya midam sarvam* meaning the entire universe is pervaded by God (**The Upanishad, 2005**). In Vedic parlance God is not a Super Human sitting somewhere out there regulating the Universe, creating stars and planets, regulating birth and death and rewarding and punishing people sending them to the Heaven and the Hell.

Instead the Universe is merely a physical manifestation of God in various names and forms. The physical entities and the living beings are one single harmonious entity constituting the universe. If we observe natural processes surrounding us, we will find that a seed grows into a trunk, roots, branches, leaves and fruits on its own without anybody adding any of those parts from outside. All these parts constitute one single entity harmoniously interconnected. If we look at human body; it also grows on its own from inside creating so many organs and systems harmoniously interconnected without any interference from outside. Even the air and water cycles flow on their own in a harmonious way. So must be the universe. Universe cannot be an exception

to this general law of nature applicable every where. Spirituality is the science that enables us to understand this oneness. Let us now have a look at a few Vedic verses explaining this spiritual science (Gupta, 2014).

Ishopanishad

ईशा वास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत्।
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गृधः कस्य स्विद्धनम्॥1॥

Whatever conscious and non-conscious that exists in this universe, is nothing but a manifestation of Brahman and is owned by Him. Keeping this in mind continue to live and enjoy in the spirit of renounced detachment. Since nothing belongs to you, do not have lust and attachment (1).

Kathopanishad

वायुर्यथैको भुवनं प्रविष्टो
रूपं रूपं प्रतिरूपो बभूव।
एकस्तथा सर्वभूतान्तरात्मा
रूपं रूपं प्रतिरूपो बहिश्च॥10॥

As air, although it exists everywhere in the Universe, takes the shape of the different spaces and also exists outside those spaces; likewise Brahman takes the shape of different creations and also exists outside those creations (2/2/1).

Mundaka Upanishad

यथोर्णनाभिः सृजते गृह्णते च
यथा पृथिव्यामोषधयः संभवन्ति
यथा सतः पुरुषात् केशलोमानि
तथाऽक्षरात् संभवतीह विश्वम्॥7॥

As the spider sends forth and spreads its web and then withdraws it back, as a large variety of plants and herbs grow on the Earth, as from every living human innumerable hairs spring forth from head and body, the same way everything arises in this universe from the Brahman, the indestructible (1/1/7).

तदेतत् सत्यं
यथा सुदीप्तात् पावकाद्विस्फुलिङ्गाः
सहस्रशः प्रभवन्ते सरूपाः।
तथाऽक्षराद्विधाः सोम्य भावाः
प्रजायन्ते तत्र चैवापि यन्ति॥1॥

This is the truth. As from the blazing fire, thousands of sparks similar to the fire fly forth; thus are innumerable beings brought forth from the imperishable Brahman, return back to Him (2/1/1).

Shvetashvatara Upanishad

संयुक्तमेतत्क्षरमक्षरं च व्यक्ताव्यक्तं भरते विश्वमीशः।
अनीशश्चात्मा बध्यते भोक्तृभावाज्ज्ञात्वा देवं मुच्यते
सर्वपाशैः॥1.8॥

Brahman supports all this creation; the perishable nature and the non-perishable soul. He supports both the manifested and the non-manifested. The human soul is bound by the fruits of the sense gratification; however, once the soul realizes the nature of Brahman, it is freed from all the fetters (1.8).

Based on this beautiful scientific explanation if we consider the entire universe as GOD in different names and forms, all violence will come to an end and GOOD will flow and nourish. There will be no conflict based on nationality, religion, ethnicity or language. There will be no need for security structures and expensive weapons. Love and respect will prevail. Bhagvad Gita says that if we can see the Self in everybody and everyone in the Self how can we hate or harm anyone. Godliness of the universe also teaches us that we must treat other living beings and nature with respect or else it will lead to our own sufferings. Violence against other beings and nature is akin to violence against one's own self. If we follow this Vedic wisdom the challenges of climate change, degradation of biodiversity and other man made ecological disasters will disappear. Harmony between man and nature is as important as harmony within human race. Let us therefore follow the path of individual freedom, scientific reasoning, critical thinking, unity, oneness, love and tolerance replacing rigid religious structures based on blind faith and hatred for others. **Live and let live.** All humans are inherently GOOD because each one of us is a particle of GOD. Let this good come out through introspection and self-contemplation. Let thousands of flowers with different colours and fragrances blossom. Each one is good and unique in its own way. All of them together provide beauty to this garden called the world. This garden is our home where we take birth, live and die. Let us not vitiate or destroy it through hatred and sectarianism. Those who follow this virtuous path of oneness in diverse manifestations are true follower of their religions. All others are living in ignorance. Let us cast away this ignorance and promote universal brotherhood based on love, compassion, diversity, tolerance and individual freedom. It is time to stop hatred and blood-shed in the mane of religion. Human are a one single family. Let us live as one single family. I will conclude this article with the following ancient Sanskrit verse:

अयं निजो परो वेत्ति गणना लघुचेतसाम्।
उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्॥

This is mine, this is yours. This kind of thinking is by those who have mean or lower consciousness and mentality. For those who have elevated thinking, the whole world is one single family.

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