

EDITORIAL:

PERCEPTIONS OF SALVATION

The basic concern of all religions is the ultimate meaning of human life, a transition to a better state from the present condition which is generally perceived to be abnormal, bound up in ignorance and suffering. The first impression regarding the present condition of human life is a of a certain disharmony with nature. Hence in the primitive religions salvation is seen as a return to the original innocence of nature through myth, magic and ritual. In these religions the Medicine - man and certain other individuals are supposed to have a secret knowledge of nature transmitted through word of mouth from generation to generation. They can guide people's actions according to that arcane wisdom. Death itself is conceived as a return to the bosom of nature and to the original state of peace and harmony.

With the dawn of what is known as the Axial Period, extending from 900 to 200 B.C., logical thinking emerged in the world and people began to raise questions of what, who, why and what for with regard to the phenomena of experience. As both Plato and Aristotle state, philosophy in Greece began with wonder at the flux and multiplicity of phenomena over against the rational expectation of stability and unity as the ideal condition of things. The highest goal of human life was naturally placed in the most perfect exercise of the highest faculties. Though there was difference of opinion whether this highest power was the will, which set good as the goal of all human search, or the intellect which showed the intelligible good as the highest good, definitely it was rational activity. Against the opinion of Heraclitus that reality itself was flux Parmenides had declared his mystical vision that the object of

human knowledge was immutable being. All that was beside being was non being, mere shadow. So over against the artisan who valued his practical knowledge for making things above every other knowledge, the politician who sought only brute power, and the poet who found delight only in merely imaginative pictures of things, Plato affirmed that the ultimate wisdom which rational beings' final happiness consisted in the contemplation of supreme Good, the form of all forms. This Good is the Sun of the moral universe, that makes all things intelligible, the one God the goal of all human search. Man is not wise, God alone is wise and the wisdom for human beings is to recognize their lack of wisdom and move towards the supreme Wisdom through the mediation of the virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and courage.

Aristotle called this supreme Intelligible the Immovable Mover who moved all things as the object of their knowledge and love, while Plato outlined in the *Symposium* the nine steps of the ascent from the perception of the beauty of material things to the direct contemplation of the one beautiful. Plotinus in his *Enneads* gave a permanent structure to Western mysticism: If the world is beautiful, your soul is more beautiful, and the World Soul is more beautiful still, and the Logos is the storehouse of all ideas, a fountain of beauty. So withdraw from the world, enter into yourself, ascend to the World Soul, contemplate the Divine Intelligence and be finally united to the one. Christianity which left the quasi-anthropomorphic spirituality of the Hebrews, who imagined Yahweh in the style of the Middle Eastern monarchs, found the Platonic mediationism a more congenial model for salvation, and presented Christ the one Mediator between God and human beings.

The Persian problematic was the existence of evil in a world created and maintained by a good and all-powerful God. Here naturally the line of solution was drawn from the all-powerful conquerors of the Middle East, who though victorious over their enemies had constantly to deal with forces inimical to them. They were also benevolent monarchs who treated graciously and generously the people who voluntarily submitted themselves to them. So life itself was seen as the meeting ground between contending cosmic forces, the good God, Ahura Mazda,

who created the spirits and all spiritual things, and his archenemy Ahriman, the bad God, who produced the material world of pain and misery including the human body itself. So the way of salvation was to be on the side of the good God in order to share in his final victory. Zoroastrianism which developed in Persia had this idea of the fight between good and evil as the core of the salvation problematic. Even in the Bible the Fall of the first parents through the temptation of Satan, and Christ's own temptation in the wilderness and mention of his struggle with the Prince of this World are indications of the underlying current of dualism.

A third problematic on which Indian sages focused attention from the very beginning was that of human suffering. Though suffering was caused by external factors like heat and cold as well as by supernal beings like gods and demons, its main source was psychological, a lack of real understanding of one's own authentic self: one superimposed on the changeless spirit the moods and changes of matter and *vice versa* identified the spirit with body. This matter-spirit composition of the human self was conceived in two different ways. One line of thinking initiated by the Samkhya school and retained in the Advaita tradition thought of the spirit as the one cosmic principle, one alone without a second, pure consciousness shining by itself without even the duality of self-consciousness, and matter as the principle of division and multiplicity. Here the ideal of salvation would be '*kaivalya*' isolation of the Spirit as the one and only Self from the illusion of multiplicity, conflict and suffering caused by the evolutive principle of matter and individuality. The Yoga and the Bhakti schools, on the other hand, saw matter as the one cosmic principle of limitation and suffering and a multitude of individual selves struggling to escape the baneful influence of matter, with the grace and guidance of *Isvara*, a divine Self.

Precisely because different religions had to struggle with radically divergent problems concerning the ultimate meaning of human life, namely the bafflement at the phenomena of nature, the existence of evil and anomaly of the suffering of the innocent, their conceptions of salvation also are ambiguous. In fact as Deconstructionists like Jacques

Derrida say, world theology is caught in the tentacles of a "Logos Philosophy" an extrapolation of the lived experience in the arbitrary ideas of a supreme being up there, an unattainable final end out there, an ideal order over against disorder, good against evil and the like. So most religions tend to avoid all metaphysical theology which cannot avoid the attraction of the four transcendental causes. The present issue of the *Journal of Dharma* is devoting itself to a study of the different soteriologies that avoid the metaphysical approach and examine human salvation from below.

Jay Longacre studies the positive value of secularization and secularity in trying to find answers human problems away from ecclesiastical tradition and ecclesiastical control. Thomas Kadankavil examines the actual concerns of a Dalit Theology. Dealing with traditional Hinduism, Thomas Manickam explains the down to earth idea of salvation presented in the Hindu epics especially Ramayana, and Thomas Manninezath discusses the Saiva Siddhanta view of salvation. Dharam Singh explains the unique effort of the Sikh religious tradition to achieve universal harmony through *sangat* and *pangat*, common sharing at table and in the teaching of the great Masters. The question still remains whether these diverse approaches have succeeded in removing the ambiguities of the most basic religious question, the final salvation of all human beings.

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