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POPULAR DEVOTIONS : A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

Devotions, whether they are popular or not, are part and parcel of the life of any human being. A human being is a devotee by nature. Psychologists like Erich Fromm consider devotion as a universal human variable which is rooted in the very conditions of human existence.¹ He describes the psychological roots of man's need for devotion in his book *Man for Himself* :

The disharmony of man's existence generates needs which far transcend those of his animal origin. These needs result in an imperative drive to restore a unity and equilibrium between himself and the rest of nature. He makes the attempt to restore this unity and equilibrium in the first place in thought by constructing an all-inclusive mental picture of the world which serves as a frame of reference from which he can derive an answer to the question of where he stands and what he ought to do. Such thought-systems are not sufficient, however. If man were only a disembodied intellect his aim would be achieved by a comprehensive thought-system. Since he is an entity endowed with a body as well as a mind he has to react to the dichotomy of his existence not only in thinking but also in the process of living, in his feelings and actions. He has to strive for the experience of unity and oneness in all spheres of his being in order to find a new equilibrium. Hence any satisfying system of orientation implies not only intellectual elements but elements of feeling and sense to be realized in action in all fields of human endeavour. *Devotion to an aim, or an idea, or a power transcending man*

1. Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1950, p. 22

*such as God, is an expression of this need for completeness in the process of living.*²

Religion offers a human being not only a frame of orientation for his intellect, but also an object of devotion for his heart, his feelings and actions. Devotion thus pertains to the emotional dimension of religion.

Popular Devotions

The term "popular devotion" can be understood in two different ways. It can be understood in a positive way as the expression of the basic need of people at large for having some "devotion" in their life in order to achieve fullness of life. It is thus an antidote for "over-cerebralization" of religion. It can also be understood in a pejorative sense: as superstitious religious practices having no or little sound intellectual or theological basis. Robert Towler's description of popular devotions as the practice of religion which is not under the control of the 'official' religion seems to be the result of a sociological approach to religion³. This distinction between popular devotions ("common religion") and official religion does not seem to help us in evaluating the intrinsic value of the two types of 'religions' or devotions. It cannot be concluded, for instance, that 'official' religion is all based on sound theological insights whereas 'popular devotions' are all superstitious. In the history of religions, one can see that there were instances where institutional religion was more superstitious than many of the popular devotions in the same religion.

Devotion : Essential to Fullness of Life

Understood positively, popular devotions can be considered as essential to fullness of life. As Fromm states human being is not a disembodied intellect which will be satisfied with a religion which provides it with a comprehensive thought-system.⁴ There must be something, someone to which the cravings of the heart too can be directed. For the completeness of life there should be some "object" of devotion too. Popular

2. Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself*, pp. 46-47 (*underline added*)

3. Robert Towler, *Homo Religiosus : Sociological Problems in the Study of Religion*, London, 1974, p. 148

4. Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, *op.cit.* p. 24

devotions, in their positive meaning, can be said to provide for such a need. A religion "within the limits of reason alone" (Kant) may not satisfy the human person. This object of devotion too can be abstract, appealing only to the intellect, or concrete, able to appeal to human being's senses and emotions. So long as human beings are 'embodied spirits', they cannot be satisfied with mere abstract ideals of devotion. They need some tangible realities to live for and direct their hearts' cravings. It is in this context that popular devotions become relevant.

Symbols form the essence of popular devotions. Icons and images, places and personalities, myths and legends are all part of popular devotions. They are all symbolic realities. As such, they can provide the human heart with something palpable to direct its cravings for the Ultimate. So long as they remain symbols, they are doing a constructive job in the fulfillment of a person's life. Human beings need symbols, especially when they deal with the ineffable, the divine. They can be described as "symbolic animals." One of the distinguishing marks of human beings as against animals is the ability of the former to deal with reality symbolically. The need for symbols cannot be considered as childish or part of the psychological process of regression. As Mircea Eliade says :

Symbolic thinking is not exclusive privilege of the Child, of the poet or of the unbalanced mind. It is consubstantial with human existence, it comes before language and discursive reason. The symbol reveals certain aspects of reality - the deepest aspects which defy any other means of knowledge. Images, symbols and myths are not irresponsible creations of the psyche; they respond to a need and fulfill a function, that of bringing to light the most hidden in modalities of being.⁵

Symbolic thinking is not unrealistic. Symbols point to some reality and are based on reality. Unlike the abstract concepts which appeal to the intellect, symbols appeal to hearts and emotions of a human being. A religion which consists exclusively of a closely knit, well-thought-out system of reasoning, is destined to be barren.

5. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, Harrell Press, London, 1952, p. 12.

Symbols are products of imagination and as such they satisfy the intellect as well. Imagination is different from fantasy.⁶ Imagination is based on reality whereas fantasy can be totally unreal, wishful. A flower can be understood as the symbol of a person's love for his/her beloved. In order to find the inherent ability of the flower to represent one's love, one has to use one's gift of imagination. If on the contrary, one identifies one's love for the beloved with the flower, it can be said to be work of childish fantasy. It is unreal. If the flower fades, the person's love for the beloved does not evaporate with it.

Deterioration of Popular Devotions

Popular devotions deteriorate when symbols are taken for the reality of the divine. It is the work of the childish fantasy which is at the root of this identification of the symbol and reality. Regression to childhood fantasies is the cause of devotions becoming sick. Here one's ultimate concern is invested in realities that are penultimate (Tillich). Human beings become enslaved by the penultimate realities which are perhaps inferior to them. Devotions become degraded into idolatry, loyalty into enslavement; self-fulfillment into self-emaciation. Idolatry leads to self-alienation of human beings. Symbols which are conventional and fashioned by human genius are considered as more sacred than the human being who designed them. This is how devotions become deviations.

The reason for forbidding the use of God's name and making of his image in the ancient Israel was in order to prevent the danger of these symbols becoming identified with the divine. For the ancient Hebrew mind, the person was somehow present in his/her name, and the image captured the reality of the person represented by it. If one knew the name of God and had some of his image in possession, that person could then make use of the reality of God to effect blessings and curses, because God was supposed to have been entrapped in these symbols. This seems to be the problem when devotions become degraded into idolatry. People believe that a particular place,

6. For an interesting discussion on the difference between imagination and fantasy, Walter J. Burghardt, *Sir, We Would Like to See Jesus*, Paulist Press, New York/Ramsey, 1982, pp. 3-14.

an icon, a relic, a formula of prayer, is magically effective because they are more than a symbol, and are identified with the divine reality they point to.

Popular Devotions and Elitist Theology

Often deviated popular devotions are considered to be a reaction to elitist theology. It seems, however, that both the elitist theologies and deviated popular devotions are cast in same mould. Both the elitist theological thinking and the magical devotional practices suffer from the same malaise: both are products of regression to childish fantasies. We have seen that it is this regression to childish fantasy which is at the root of the identification of the symbols with the reality they symbolize, and thus degrading devotions. It is the same regression to childhood fantasies which produce an elitist theology too. The hall-mark of the elitist theology is its lack of touch with reality. For a child the difference between the real world and the world of ideas is razor thin. Very often they bridge the gap between the real and their wishful thinking with fantasies. For a little child a toy gun is in all effects a real gun. If an adult "shoots at" him with the toy-gun, the child is very likely to panic. The wall against which he accidentally bumped his head is a living reality for a child. Therefore he would be very pleased if someone punishes the wall which was the cause of his pain. In the elitist theology too, often the theologian's mental concoctions are attributed a quality of reality beyond their symbolic value. A system of thought is built up around them. No concern is shown to see if they correspond to reality. No wonder such theology creates boredom and ennui in the minds of people. The complaint that is often levelled against such theology is that whereas Jesus' preaching and teaching was so appealing to people, and is even today, the theologies that develop from that message are not so. The difference, I think, is that Jesus' used religious imagination, whereas the elitist theology uses childish fantasy. For Jesus' the lilies of the field and the birds of the air and the babe at its mother's breast were all symbols of a deeper reality. They formed part and parcel of this preaching. In elitist theology they become substituted by abstract notions of "pure being", "pure consciousness"!! From such abstract notions, which are not often related to the reality which men and women of a given age and culture experience as real, much arm-chair theologies develop.

They form the bulk of the elitist theology. It does not even satisfy the normal human intellect. Instead of filling the gap created by such a barren theology with some deviated devotional practices, what one has to develop is a meaningful theology where religious imagination, instead of childish fantasies, is at work. Both the elitist theology and superstitious devotions emanate from human mind's inability to distinguish between reality and symbols denoting the reality.

Deviated forms of devotions can be present even in the so-called 'official' religions. Blind allegiance to out-dated symbols and formulae in the official liturgies of many religions is a classical example of symbols being identified with the reality they were supposed to represent. The mentality seems to be that when symbols change the reality which was denoted by them too vanishes. Symbols which are always socio-culturally limited are described as 'sacred' and some sort of immutability is attributed to them. They become fossilized. Here again the penultimate is given the place of the ultimate. Instead of honest worship of God, veneration of these symbols acquires some paramount importance. Thus even 'official' liturgies become idolatrous in practice.

What St. Augustine said long ago remains to be the truth : "You have created us for you ; our hearts are restless until they find rest in you." Human hearts need an object of devotion. The only 'object' which would satisfy the human heart, however, is the Ultimate alone. All the other realities to which human heart is devoted satisfy it only to the extent they lead it to the Ultimate. Human beings need such intermediary realities without which devotions can become vague and nebulous. Devotions deviate only when these 'objects' of devotion become identified with the Ultimate.

Deviated devotions : a Source of Psychopathology

Devotions, thus have to be evaluated not on the basis of whether or not they are officially approved by the institutionalized religion. The criterion for deciding if a devotional practice is healthy or not is its ability to lead the devotee to the true object of devotion in which alone the human heart finds the ultimate satisfaction. The devotion which becomes an obstacle for this transcendence to the ultimate is idolatrous. All other types of devotions can be considered as a positive help in enabling him to open up to the Divine and finding integration of the cravings of his heart.

The question, therefore, is not whether to have devotions or not, but which kind of devotions, whether they are the ones "furthering man's development, the unfolding of his specially human powers, or . . . paralyzing them."⁷ From a psychological point of view, it is clear that any one who has failed to achieve maturity and integration has a neurosis of one kind or another. In Fromm's words:

He does not "just live," unbothered by this failure [to achieve maturity and integration], satisfied to eat and drink, sleep and have sexual satisfaction and do his work; if this were the case then indeed we would have the proof that the religious attitude, while perhaps desirable, is not an intrinsic part of human nature. But the study of man shows that this is not so. If a person has not succeeded in integrating his energies in the direction of his higher self, he canalizes them in the direction of lower goals; if he has no picture of the world and his position in it which approximates the truth, he will create a picture which is illusory and cling to it with the same tenacity with which the religionist believes in his dogmas. Indeed, "man does not live by bread alone," he has only the choice of better or worse, higher or lower, satisfactory or destructive forms of religions and philosophies.⁸

It is, therefore, evident that many forms of popular devotions can be described as neuroses. They are the result of a human being canalizing his/her energies in the direction of lower goals. Enslaved by these lower goals they fail to reach out to the higher goals. The feeling of security and safety provided by these devotions delude them. In the long run, of course, these enslaving devotions cause more problems, but the temporary satisfaction provided by them allures the devotees to cling to them desperately. It must be referring to this type of religious devotion that Sigmund Freud said that religion has its origin in man's helplessness in confronting the forces of nature outside and the instinctive forces within himself. In such helpless situations human beings tend to cling to any straw that is available. They delude themselves by believing that this clinging to some inferior goals will enable them to overcome the limitations

7. Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

8. Erich Fromm, *Ibid.* p. 28.

human nature imposes on them. Illness and death, natural catastrophes and financial problems are such limitations which can tempt them to develop some sort of such "devotions." As Freud himself suggests, the healthy way for human beings in such situations is to educate themselves to face reality and live within the limitations of reality. Devotions that enable them to face and accept reality are the ones that can be considered to be healthy from a psychological point of view. From a theological point of view too, this is the ideal course of action prescribed by most of the world religions. Genuine religious traditions try to enable human beings to live a life to its fullest possibilities within the given context and limitations inherent in being human. That is why surrender to the "will of God" which is represented by the reality He created, is the core of most of the religious traditions in the world. This type of religious devotion brings about serenity and calm, the will-to-live and to-be-happy, with confidence and trust. Popular devotions that invite people to live in the illusory world, only make human beings become more and more nervous and fearful.