

Archana Barua
St. Anthony's College, Shillong

A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE NATURE OF RELIGION

Introduction

The need for religion is an intrinsic element of human nature. Granted this, the question that I intend to raise in this article is not religion or no religion, but what kind of religion? Since we live in an age of science, we cannot be called upon to accept dogmas or exclusive revelations. Reason should justify our religiosity. Religion, if it has any message today, must be in harmony with science on the one hand, and with humanism on the other hand. The main endeavour in this article is to show that the spirit of science is not opposed to the spirit of religion. The negative definition of religion will be followed by a positive analysis of religion. The philosophical observation about the nature of religion is supported by the actual historical observation and this would enable me to suggest that philosophy is not remote and other worldly. Hence, the philosophical perspective is supported by a historical perspective in the following manner.

The Nature of Religion

1. The negative definition of Religion from the Philosophical perspective

a) 'Religion' versus 'Magic'

"Before Greece, all religion was magical. Magic was of supreme importance."¹

"The human mind played no part at all in the whole business. It was enslaved by terror. A magical universe was so terrifying

1. Edith Hamilton. *The Greek Way to Western Civilization*. (New York : New American Library, 1954).

because it was so irrational, and therefore, completely incalculable. There was no dependable relation anywhere between cause and effect."²

"The unique achievement of the west, by contrast, was to liberate the individual by proclaiming the value of personality and giving the support of tradition to his efforts to realise his value. Even the medieval scholars and saints dared much more than the Confucian sages. Renaissance Humanism and Protestant reformers strengthened the confidence of individual in his own power, and in his free, direct access to the gods of this world or to god."³

b) *From the Historical and Sociological Perspectives*

In the primitive background, magic dominated over religion. The rituals are performed to control nature magically. In such a situation, Religion becomes mechanical and the human mind becomes subject to the magic religion becomes a matter of skill and efficiency. The Priest, who controlled the rituals, controlled the gods of religion.

In the Brahmanical religions also, the magical performances of the rituals was of supreme importance. The Brahmin Priest aimed at magically controlling the gods. As magic is an attempt at controlling the natural phenomena with spells and rites, the correct performance of the 'yajna' assured smooth functioning of the world. It should be obvious from the following observations that magic dominated over the Vedic religion: "... the remarkable similarity between Lokayata and the deeper stratum of the Vedic outlook."⁴

"How do these texts (the Brahmanas) look at Yajna? As magic or essentially magical"⁵

Although the Brahmanic theology envisaged a large number of deities, prominent among whom were Indra and Agni, even those were held to be subject to the power of sacrifice. By the time of the early Buddhist

2. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

3. Hervert J. Muller. *The Uses of the Past*.

4. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya. *Lokayata*, p. 664.

5. D.P. Chattopadhyaya. *Indian Philosophy*.

period, religion of the Vedas had reached a development in which as S. N. Dasgupta observed :

Sacrifice was not offered to a god with a view to propitiate him or to obtain his welfare on earth or bliss in heaven, those rewards are directly produced by the sacrifice itself through a correct performance of complicated and interconnected ceremonials which constitute the sacrifice.⁶

Such religion turns out to be magical and religion comes to be identified with the controlling of the supernatural. This would end in identifying religion to the controlling of an impersonal force, called after the Melanesian name mana, manifested throughout the universe.

However, this hasty generalization is not warranted as the latter researches have invalidated the primordial and universal character of mana. It would be wise to refrain from generalizing on the universality of the mana. As an eminent thinker observes :

... So many invalid hypotheses warn us to be prudent. We will limit ourselves to the statement that, among the 'Primitives' as among the moderns, the sacred is manifested in a multitude of forms and variants, but that all these hierphanies are charged with 'power'. The sacred is strong, powerful, because it is 'real'; it is efficacious and durable . . .⁷

... this amounts to saying that the Malanesians implicitly acknowledge several modalities of the sacred - gods, spirits, ghosts etc. A simple analysis of the few examples quoted will verify this. But the religious life of the Malanesians is not confined to belief in the mana conferred by gods or spirits. It consists also of cosmologies, mythologies, complex rituals and even theologies also; which means that there are different modalities of the sacred, and that various magico-religious powers correspond to these multiple modalities. It is natural that the power manifested by a canoe endowed with mana should be of quite another quality than the power that emanates from a symbol,

6. Trevor Ling, *The Buddha*. (New York : Pelican Books, 1976). pp. 81-82.

7. Mircea Eliade. *Myths, Dreams & Mysteries*, (Fontana Lib.), p. 130.

from a myth or a divine figure. The power of 'mana' manifests itself directly; one sees or fills it, one can verify it in this or that object or in an efficacious action. The power of a heavenly Creator Being – Such powers are attested more or less everywhere in Melanesia – is only indirectly experienced: the Melanesian is not unaware that the Creator must have disposed of vast power to have made the world, but he does not feel that power 'immediately' by his senses. Consequently, these Creator – Beings are hardly worshipped at all. They have become gods who are remotes, inactive and we presently see the importance of this phenomenon for the history of religions.⁸

There are different planes of manifestations of the sacred. Certain manifestations attract our immediate attention. Certain other manifestations of the sacred are discrete and veiled. It would be wrong to assume that, in the primitive religions, the sacred manifested only as a force. On the contrary they are perfectly aware, for instance, thought can be a source of energy. All the celestial gods of the 'primitives' possess attributes and power and denote intelligence, knowledge and wisdom. This confirms that the idea that the primitives are not ignorant of the idea of a god who is the creator, omniscient and all powerful. This idea was, in however forms, present in the primitive religions although this discrete manifestation of the sacred was almost forgotten as the attention of the primitives was won over by the more powerful manifestation of the sacred. This is evident as magic dominates over the religions of the primitives to such an extent that the religions of the primitive societies came to be seen as the controlling of the mana only.

In the Brahmanic theology also, though the magical performance of the *Yajñas* dominated over religion, it would be wrong to suppose that the 'Vedas' presented only one plane of the manifestation of the sacred. The Rg Veda acknowledges the reality of the one deity underlying the various manifestations. The Rg Veda gives evidence of a very complex and advanced stage of civilization and culture. This confirms the idea that neither the primitives, nor the polytheists were ignorant of the idea of a god who is the creator, omniscient and all powerful.

8. *Ibid.* 1. for instance it is unknown in Otung (N.E. of the Solomons), in Wages (one of the New Gánica Isles); of Hogbin, *Mana*, pp. 268-85, or in Wagarwaga, Tuba etc. See C.G. Seligman, *Melanesians of British New Gunie*, Cambridge, 1910, p. 570.

The idea of such a Creator Deity is implicit. The divinities which could reproduce life and 'augment' it replaced the 'Creator Deity' of the primitives and of the polytheists. This is very natural, as man mostly allows himself to be carried away by the sacredness of life. As man turned away from the sanctities which surpass his immediate needs, the Highest Heavenly Being has declined in practical religious importance. He is remembered, however, as a last resort. The divinities for life have become specialised and thus they have lost the noble and spiritual powers of the Creator Gods. Religion, ignoring the essential aspect of faith in the Creator Deity, concentrated on the finite deities to ensure life.

The *Karmakandas* of the Vedas, however, did not satisfy the Upanisadic seers. They have sought to liberate man from the tyranny of nature. This, they argued, could be done only by recognising the spiritual qualities. Man as spirit can realize a higher goal in life if he disassociates him from the charm of matter. This can be done by the utmost control of the senses and by making religion spiritual.

To safeguard one's spiritual journey, man was required not to yield to the temptation of magically controlling nature. The fury and the heat aroused by a violent access of 'power' strike fear in the majority of mortals: power of that kind, in its crude state, is chiefly of interest to magicians and warriors. Those, who are looking to religion for confidence and peace, would rather protect them against magical 'fire'. The Vedic seers also acknowledged a difference between a magician and a true 'yogi'. The Indian of Vedic times felt the danger of magic, he resisted temptations to acquire more power.

Let us recall by the way that the true 'yogi' also, has to overcome the temptation of 'magical powers' (Siddhi) – the temptations of acquiring the power to fly, or to become invisible etc. – if he is to reach the perfectly non-conditioned state of 'Samadhi'.⁹

We must not, however, draw the conclusion that the experience of 'heat' and the obtaining of power belong exclusively to the sphere of magic. A saint, a Shaman, a Yogi, are all apt to feel the super-

9. Mircea Eliade. *Myths, Dreams & Mysteries*, pp. 149-150.

natural warmth to the degree that they suppress the profane human conditions and become embodiments of the sacred.

But the point to note in this connection, is that, the religious man who experiences 'magical heat,' has to maintain utmost control and is asked to resist temptations of 'Siddhi,' because his goal is the liberation of the spirit from the tyranny of matter.

As religion disassociates itself from magic, the spiritual qualities of the remote creator Deity of the primitives, the inactive supreme god of the power worshippers, draw the attention of the reformers of religion. The prophets have spiritualised the existing religions at different times.

It is a remarkable fact that the simplicity of worship which is characteristic of monetheism, and of Jewish propheticism, corresponds to the supreme Being among the 'primitives.' As this worship has almost disappeared, but we know in what it consisted: its offerings, first fruits, and its prayers addressed to the Supreme Being.¹⁰

These characterise the spiritual religions also.

The supreme deity of the spiritual religions was thought to be the most sacred, though mostly veiled and unmanifest. In the religions of power also, this deity is the husband of Sakti.

Siva, being the symbol of pure spirit, of absolute consciousness the effort to 'activate' him by union with his Sakti denotes, among other things, the respect and veneration in which the Supreme Being is still held even when he has become 'impotent.'¹¹

As this aspect of the presence of a supreme deity is never lost in the different phases of its development, religion needs not be identified with the worship of the finite deities. True religion is much more than the performance of the rituals and this aspect of religion becomes

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

more prominent as one rationally disassociates the superstitions and the magical from the true essence of religion. Religion, in this manner, is rational. To deny this is to make religion a matter of 'faith' only and then, sooner or later, a conflict of the rational self and the sentimental leads to a disillusionment. As 'faith' in religion is shaken by reason, faith in some other dogmas replaces religion. In the words of Nehru:

Religion gave a certain moral and spiritual discipline; it also tried to perpetuate superstitions and social usages. Indeed these superstitions and social usages enmeshed and overwhelmed the real spirit of religion. Disillusionment followed. Communism comes in the wake of this disillusionment and offers some kind of faith and some kind of discipline. To some extent it fills a vacuum.¹²

2 Religion versus Materialism

a) *From the Philosophical Perspective*

The materialistic element relies solely on external social solution which suppresses individual liberty and infallibly leads to dictatorship or what amounts to the same things to organisations inspired by the 'Societies' of insects.¹³

Europe has ceased to be the centre of the world . . . (It) is the greatest shift in the world balance since the upheavals of the fifteenth century . . . The Russians and the Chinese can master our machines; will they ever have our respect for individual lives and recognition of the human spirit in every man.¹⁴

Materialism according to (James) Ward, can make nothing of the striving, valuing individual: for to understand the individual, he thought, we must make use of that category of purpose which the materialist discards.¹⁵

12. J. Nehru, *An Anthology*, pp. 282-283.

13. Locomte du Nouy, *Human Destiny*, p. 169.

14. A.J.P. Taylor, *Europe : Grandeur and Decline*, pp. 373-374.

15. John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, p. 53.

The materialistic theory conceives of man as exclusively a social being, who count in the process solely as a medium for the transposition and expression of social laws and exchanges; whereas he is in fact an individual, acting out his own life as such.¹⁶

All these above observations have pointed out how the materialistic interpretation of man is motivated by its desire to inspire social solutions only. As it provides no scope for the realisation of the human ideals which give meaning and dignity to life, religion, which wants to preserve the spiritual ideals, opposes materialism.

b) *The Historical and the Sociological Perspective*

Various forms of materialism were known to the ancient Indian writers.

An verse from the Katha upanisad tells us that the Self-born Lord injured the organs by making them outgoing in their tendencies. Therefore, they perceive only external things, but not the inner self.¹⁷

The materialists, like the Carvakas, and the Mimamsakas, recognised the spirit in man as a mere product of matter. The Samkhya theory of Purusa and Prakrti sought to restore the superiority of the spirit by a dichotomy of matter and spirit. The spirit is different from matter as consciousness is its permanent property. The spirit is pure and is opposed to matter.

The Advaita Vedanta, in its concern for the purity of the spirit, declared matter as illusion. The spirit is knowledge, bliss and existence, and there is only one spirit as there is none else to challenge its supremacy.

These theories have discarded materialism and have supported spiritualism. Religion also wants to safeguard the spiritual qualities in man

16. Thretein Veblen, Quoted in Murray Wolfrous's *A Reprisal of Marxian Economics*, p. 112.

17. P.B. Vidyarthi, *Knowledge, Self & God in Ramanuja*, (New Delhi ; Oriental Publishers and Distributors, 1978. (Katha Up. 11-1), p. 104.

and hence finds support in the theories which give due recognition to the Supremacy of the Spirit.

3. Religion versus Monism

a) *The Philosophical Perspective*

Kant held that it was necessary for morality to postulate the existence of God, freedom and immortality, of these, the postulates of freedom has been commonly regarded as a truth without which moral judgements would be impossible. Moral action of continuous selves who are in some sense the cause of their actions. As a matter of fact, there are two metaphysical schools which have tended to deny this, (a) The materialists hold that actions are produced entirely by causes which in the first place at any rate were outside the body of the agent. The individual can no more be said to cause his own actions than a ball which is impelled by a second ball can be said to move itself or cause the movements of a third ball on a billiard table. (b) Idealists of a certain type hold that the individual has no reality except in so far as he is an aspect of one Universal Self On either theory, moral actions must be illusory, and so we must hold that the individual selves who are to some sense the cause of their actions, is a necessary postulate for ethics.¹⁸

Personality is a matter of crucial importance to religion and the issue on which absolute monism and theism of Ramanuja are divided from each other is whether the idea of personality as the character of Brahman can be philosophically justified. This is the old question whether the religious stand point can be held to be theoretically valid.¹⁹ "Ramanuja is only the first of Vaishnavite philosophers . . . who rejected Sankaras pure monism as being destructive of religion."²⁰

Absolute monism deprives man of that by virtue of which he can be an active centre of consciousness. A person without a personality is a

18. W. Lillie, *An Introduction to Ethics*, p. 294.

19. P.B. Vidyarthi. *Op. cit.*, p. 306.

20. R.C. Zaehner. *Hinduism*.

very novel picture of man. It makes moral actions illusory. The irony is that the Absolutism, by denying the self-conscious centre of consciousness, reduces the spirit in man to bare consciousness and thus there is not much difference between this picture of a soul with the materialistic idea of the Spirit as a product of matter. "Naturalism and Absolutism antagonistic as they seem to be combine in assuring that personality is an illusion."²¹

b) The Historical and the Sociological Perspective

In the Indian context, Ramanuja represents one of the oldest traditions and he, by the help of traditional support, establishes the religion of Vaishnavism. In his concern for defending religion he opposed the Absolutists interpretations of the texts who had built up their systems of concentrating wholly on the few identity passages of the texts, ignoring some other passages which give a different picture. Ramanuja wanted to safeguard the egohood of the spirit and on the basis of the scriptures has established the atomic nature of the self. The spirits, he argued, are atomic and are under the control of the divine spirit at three different stages: (i) prior to creation, as potencies of the Lord, (ii) During creation, (iii) and even after the attainment of final release. The liberated spirit, as the theists argue, is devoid of ahamkara but possesses the 'aham', to enjoy the mystic bliss of union. Although the texts mostly express the ecstasy of union in the 'advaitic terms', it is merely a formal borrowing, as the 'Isvara' is also the inner dweller and is transcendent to the spirit. The theists often recognise their system as advaita, although it has a different significance from the 'advaita' of Samkara. As Rabindra Nath Tagore observes:

This Brahma-vidya in India has followed two different courses. In the one, the supreme soul is viewed as monistic, absolutely negating the phenomenal world; in the other as dualistic in creative imagination, yet one in essence. Unless duality is admitted there can be no worship; but if at the same time fundamental unity be not recognised, the worship cannot be intimate and loving.²²

21. Krishna Chaitanya, *The Mahabharata : A Literary Study*, pp. 213-214.

22. Rabindra Nath Tagore, *Vision of Indian History*, Visva Bharati, Calcutta.

This would explain why the theists called themselves advaitins although they rejected the māyāvāda of Sankara.

Ramanuja called his system, Visistadvaita, 'non-dualism in difference, and is only the first of Vaishnavite philosophers of whom Madhva, Vallabha, Nimbarka and the followers of Caitanya are the most important who rejected Sankara's pure monism as being destructive of religion.²³

The theists' principal intention was to safeguard the personal character of the Brahman at the transcendental level. They often quoted 'monistic passages' in their writings although from a different perspective and with the aim of rejecting the illusionary interpretation of Sankara.

The illusionist sect of Sankara – who himself hailed from Kerela also extended its tentacles throughout the country, but vernacular literature on its behalf was conspicuous by its absence; (at the most non-sectarians like Tulasi and Jnaneswara flirt with Sankara's philosophy, but it is flirting that they at the most do).²⁴

On the whole, the theists sought to defend religion philosophically by rejecting the absolute monism of Sankara.

From the above discussions one can perhaps make a statement that philosophically speaking, religion is not to be identified with magic, materialism and monism. The question to be raised is 'what religion is', for which one should perhaps re-examine some of the philosophical and historical observations which sought to define religion positively.

23. R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, p. 100.

24. K.K. Dixit, "The History and the Historical Significance of Indian Logic" in *Inquiry* (Ed. by Bipan Chandra), Winter, 1964, p. 107.