

# Role of Religion in Social Change

## The Idea of Religion

Generally our idea of religion labours under a misconception. By the word religion we think of an invisible realm of souls, gods and spirits. In the wider sense, religion consists of faiths and practices, prayers and incantations ceremonials and other observances of persons in relation to something divine. In a striater sense it symbolizes the spiritual urge, endeavour and final fulfilment of the soul's struggle for the manifestation and full realization of the divine in Man. Thus "on the objective side, religion involves the recurring performance of certain human activities and thus belongs to the realm of external phenomena; on the subjective, it is a part of the hidden experience of the psychic life."<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to say whether the objective side or subjective side is more important. When the purpose is to study religion in the context of social change the objective side may appear more important. Present-day sociologists however, argue that social change implies changes in the minds and ideas of man, and so the subjective side is also equally important.

For the theists, religion is an attempt to know or to realize or to reach the highest reality or God and also to know one's own nature. "Religion is the manifestation of the Divinity already in man."<sup>2</sup> "It is a matter of experience. It is not awakening from a swoon—but a transformation of one's own being."<sup>3</sup> In the existentialist language, it is becoming 'the Knight of Faith'—that is, to be capable of responding in the innermost recesses of one's being to God and capable of developing the strength of carrying out of his wishes in silence and

1. *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1963), p. 228.
2. Swami Vivekananda, *Selections from Swami Vivekananda* (Madras: Vivekananda Kendra Publications, 1961), p. 81.
3. Radhakrishnan, *The Cultural Heritage of India*. Vol. I (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission, 1975), p. 14.

loneliness.<sup>4</sup> In this context, it may be noted that it is the absence of spiritual religion that has led men on to the various pseudo religions of today. Only a spiritual religion can bring about individual salvation and social harmony. Religion is not a type of private advancement. It strikes a balance between the contradictory and conflicting forces that are inherent in every human being. It marks the way one can earn and yet refrain from degenerating into an acquisitive soul; enjoy oneself through one's senses, yet refrain from becoming debauch; give free play to emotions and impulses, desires and ambitions without being oppressive, perverted and uncontrolled. The present-day ills can be traced to one basic weakness of human beings—lack of mental and physical equipoise and self-control. The wars, oppressions, exploitations, hatred, diseases, all spring from one primary cause viz., lack of self-control. H. G. Wells puts it bluntly when he says, "It is scarcely an exaggeration to say at present mankind as a species is demented and that nothing is so urgent upon us as the recovery of mental self-control."<sup>5</sup> Toynbee observes that since the middle of the palaeolithic age man has been the master of his natural environments and since then all his sufferings have been caused by himself. Because man is yet to attain ascendancy over his lower self. Only religion can make possible what seems to be almost impossible. The watchword of every religion is restraint in every sphere of life. Religion is a challenge to reconstruct society on the basis of love and sympathy. Starbuck, while discussing the value of religious life writes in his famous book on religion, "the individual learns to transfer himself from a centre of self-activity into an organ of revelation, of universal being and to live a life of affection for and oneness with the larger life outside." The great religions of the world have cared little for ceremonial observance. They have laid great stress on ethical excellence and service to society. They have ceaselessly addressed themselves to the most exalting task of the remaking of man. They have believed that men can change through education and be perfected by religion.

True religion is also ethical. Today we are asked to be persistently moral, honest and unselfish, noble in our social, economic and

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4. *Fear and Trembling & Sickness Unto Death*, Tr. by W. Lowrie (New Jersey: Princeton, 1954), p. 49.

5. *A Short History of the World* (London: Macmillan & Company, 1961), p. 334.

political life without being religious. This is indeed a fallacy so far as common man is concerned. Because the conduct of the general people cannot be made morally high without the sustaining aid of religious or moral convictions. Rajagopalachari writes, "Right conduct cannot float in the air, but requires a conviction and faith to support it." So right conduct must be guided and sustained by man's religious faith. In the words of sister Nivedita, "Character is spirituality; without this no progress is possible in the spiritual path. Morality is the gate to God-realization. True religion is the universal religion of right conduct, of love and compassion, of truth and rectitude, of growing knowledge and dedication and worship of a God who is the same for all who is all in all, above all."

Religion brings out the central truth that man does not live entirely for himself, or entirely for the community. It brings out the unique harmony between the persistent claims of the individual and of the community. It vindicates sacredness of the individuals, which is in perpetual jeopardy today. The individual, that is the spirit in the Body, is the most valuable thing in human life, and not what happens on a battle-field, in the clash of politics or in the regimented movement of men towards standards of living.

In the final analysis, religion is a unique spiritual experience. Some point out that there are men who are not able to experience the religious feelings. This is no argument against religion. To use the language of Einstein, we have the perfection of means but the confusion of ends. Religion is now called upon to present to the world and its people a clear, full and ultimate picture of the ends so that the perfected means may realize them for the good of humanity. Therefore, the primary role of religion would be to lift man out of the miasmatic pool of egotism to the haven of universality. Millions today totter on the brink of indecision because they have no definite ends or goals in view. The modern man who has lost faith in God and religion often seeks to find consolation from the psychiatrist's couch. Genuine religion can endow every man with an ultimate aim and help him to support the hidden, immense energies of the soul through faith in God.

There can be no force greater than religion in shaping the future of mankind. Mutual relations and understandings should develop among all religions; they should accept the light that each religion

has to offer and practise the truths inculcated so that harmony of mankind which can do away with this disintegration becomes possible. Gandhiji once said, "The soul of religion is one, but it is encased in a multitude of forms. Wise men will ignore the outward crust and see the same soul under a variety of 'crusts. Truth is the exclusive property of no single scripture."

### **Religion and Society**

The influence of religion has been felt in the whole history of mankind. It has proved to be indispensable for the evolution of humanity from a state of animality to the status of Divinity. It has helped draw the best and the noblest in man. Religion makes a man good and it is good men that make up a good society. Hence religion forms the basis of good society. From its very inception it has been the standard-bearer of human civilization and culture. It has been, is, and will be the binding force that unites individuals, to form the human family. Socially it is concerned with man's life in relation to his fellow men, urging him to act according to certain moral laws and social duties. It prescribes the practice of certain virtues as the foundation of personal as well as social life. The possession of these virtues is considered the *sine qua non* of any progress, individual and social. It is the practice of these virtues by individuals that creates in them a sense of duty and obligation towards one another and gives rise to fellow feeling, love, help, charity and service to society. In the words of the well-known sociologist Emile Durkheim, "a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, uniting into a single moral community all those who adhere to those beliefs and practices."<sup>6</sup> Hence religion is rightly said to be one that sustains the universe and all the creatures in it. Professor Max Müller said, "The true history of mankind is the history of Religion."<sup>7</sup> That Religion continues to wield its influence even in the modern scientific age is itself a proof of the fact that it is a dire necessity in man's life.

No society can be said to be devoid of some form of religion. Modern sociologists who deal with different aspects of society

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6. *The Elementary Forms of Religion* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1912), p. 47.

7. Quoted by D. M. Edwards, *The Philosophy of Religion* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1960), p. 9.

emphasize the role of religion in society and speak of its vital importance in the society. The performance of religious rites were very common in primitive society. On almost all important occasions such as birth, marriage, harvesting, hunting, death etc. religious rites were performed. Even in the modern age, these religious rites are performed on various occasions related to social, economic and political life of society. For instance, we do perform religious rites on such occasions as the inauguration of a new building, or the starting of a new business; oaths are taken before assuming important offices in political or social life. Referring to this, Broom and Selznick observe: "Religious beliefs and practices exist in every known society, from the most simple and the isolated to the complex and urbane. Not all individuals are religious, but some form of religious behaviour is found in all human communities."<sup>8</sup> The performance of these rites invoked in them a sense of common feeling and need for concerted action.

Religion is the bearer of human culture. It serves as an important factor for grouping people in society. In almost all societies some kind of religious institutions like temples, churches and mosques are formed. In these institutions people assemble for prayer and worship. The act of common prayer stimulates in them common feelings and sentiments. And because of common feelings people sometimes undertake common works for the welfare of society. The opening of schools, orphanages, hospitals, homes for the destitutes result from the common feelings for the welfare of the society. Thus we see that religious institutions are the means for organizing the society in a more beneficial way in order to do many important things for the good of society.

Religion establishes common norms of behaviour for the men living in the society. By establishing the common norms of behaviour it moulds the character of the people in a meaningful way. It teaches men to obey the social laws, to have respect and sympathy for others, to discharge their social obligations, to develop love and fellow-feeling and serve humanity. Thus religion helps in stabilizing social order by enforcing, uniformity of behaviour and by strengthening social solidarity. Genuine religion frees man from all narrowness of vision and expands his heart to accept others and live with them in enduring

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8. *Sociology—A text book with Adapted Readings* (New York: Harper & Row 1968), p. 30.

ties of love and friendship. Thus religion is an integrating factor in society. In the words of Dr. Radhakrishnan, through "the religious life and prayer and contemplation we are brought together."<sup>9</sup> Religion thus acts as a cohesive force in society. Sociologists also accept this fact. According to Broom and Selznick "From the standpoint of its role in society, one of the greatest potential capacities of religion is the promotion of group cohesion."<sup>10</sup> Durkheim also regards this as a very important function of religion when he says, "The idea of society is the soul of religion."<sup>11</sup>

### Can Religion Change Society ?

In the words of Maciver: "Society is a becoming, not a being: a process, not a product."<sup>12</sup> Society should always change, because whatever does not change remains stunted. David Starr Jordan, a well-known evolutionist maintained that a healthy society should always adjust itself to changing times. Change is the law of life. We continue to change till we are dead. Biologically speaking, the human organism, in order to exist must learn to adapt to changing situations and circumstances. Just as in other areas of human endeavour, changes have come about in the nature and way of performance of religious rites in modern times. A religious rite which might have been useful for the primitive society proves to be out of date and useless in the context of modern society. So it is interesting to know that religion while influencing the progress of society has itself changed in order to adapt itself to new circumstances.

Thus the relationship between religion and society is one of reciprocity. The influence exerted is mutual. The principles of religion when manifested through rituals and rites absorb the tendencies prevailing in the society. And the social customs and behaviour are also modified by religious practices. But whether these actions and interactions are beneficial to society, is the crux of the matter. Since human society is not divided into watertight compartments labelled social, political and religious, it is not possible to determine quantitatively the effect on any one of these factors independently and individually on social change of a particular period. But no one can

9. *Religion and Society* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), p. 53.

10. Broom and Selznick, *op. cit.*, p. 308.

11. Durkheim, *op. cit.*, p. 419.

12. R. M. Maciver and G. H. Page, *Society* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 36.

deny the role of religion and religious ideas as determinants of social change. According to Gandhiji, even a religious ideal or spiritual law expresses itself only through ordinary social activities of life. It thus effects the economic, social and political fields.

Like science and philosophy, religion also took note of the social and individual aspects of man. If man is a political animal to Plato and a social animal to Aristotle, to Einstein "he (man) is, at one and the same time, a solitary being, and a social being. As a solitary being he attempts to protect his existence and that of those who are closest to him, to satisfy his personal desires, and develop his innate abilities. As a social being, he seeks to gain the recognition and attention of his fellow beings to share their pleasure, to comfort them in their sorrows and improve their conditions of life."<sup>13</sup> The religious prophets and teachers who understood this dual psychology of human nature wanted to change society by changing the individuals. This experiment undoubtedly worked miracles in the course of the growth of human civilization. It enabled man to cast off much of his barbarism and cultivate many moral and social virtues in personal and social life.

Normally social change takes place through revolution or evolution. The one is as necessary as the other. Societies and nations have progressed in both ways. Change through revolution is characterized by its scope and speed. If change takes place in one or other of the realms of social life, it cannot be called revolutionary. Revolutionary change has to be sweeping and sudden. It must affect the entire structure of society. But a change through the influence of religious ideas and ideals takes place slowly and in a more or less natural way. They are different from changes achieved through revolution. They bring about changes deep down—in the heart and minds of the individuals and hence revolutionize the spirit of man. In fact, social and political changes in history have been caused more by change of ideas and values than by material cause. The social changes which are brought about through evolution and revolution though seemingly drastic are only peripheral from the point of the individual and therefore they are not lasting. But changes brought about through religion result in the conversion of the whole man. It implies funda-

13. "Why Socialism" in L. Humbemmann and Paul Sweeeyed, *Introduction to Socialism* (New York: Modern Reader, 1968), pp. 12-13.

mental changes in our ideas and ideology, ethos and values of life. It causes metamorphosis or transformation in the human mind. These metamorphosis can be discussed under two heads: 1) change of heart or conversion of Man 2) change of ideas and opinions.

Change of heart denotes a complete and thorough change in the personality of the individual. The very mode of the individual's thinking undergoes a comprehensive transformation. This in turn brings about desirable changes in his actions too. This lends a more honourable and dignified complexion to social conduct. William James emphasizes the role of personality changes in the individual through religious ideas and ideals. Referring to the religio-theological type of conversion he writes, "Religious ideas, previously peripheral in consciousness, now take a central place, and religious aims form the habitual centre of energy."<sup>14</sup> Religio-Psychological studies have shown that conversion of heart results from a sense of incompleteness, imperfection, brooding, sense of sin, anxiety about the hereafter, distress over doubts and the like;<sup>15</sup> many of these are common to all religious modes of behaviour. Sentiments, emotions and feelings are all important in our religious and moral life. History shows that the sufferings experienced by the religious prophets, leaders and reformers always exerted tremendous influence on the minds of the pious and righteous people. Thus none can deny the fact that religion acts as an instrument of social change in individuals and through individuals, the society.

Social change is best achieved through change of ideas and opinions. Ideologies characterize all dynamic societies. They help to make more explicit the moral basis of action. Ideology helps to perform two main functions: one directly social, binding the community together, and the other individual, organizing the personality of the maturing individual. Ideas control the world and hence ideological war is more important than actual war. Ideas control society and hence ideological changes affect the man and society best. Principles have brought about more social-changes than events and actions.

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14. William James, *Variety of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library Series, 1929), p. 193.

15. Watter Houston Clark, *The Psychology of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), pp. 217-18.



From what we have discussed it is clear that religion advocates social change through non-violent means. The dangers of violent revolutions are well-known. In a violent revolution the atmosphere of the whole society is surcharged with hate, fear and revenge and hence the human values of love, sympathy and fellow-feeling are crucified. It is hardly possible for arts and cultural activities to flourish in such a situation. The individual has to sacrifice his freedom and fellowship. The non-violent revolution, on the other hand, accepts the worth and the freedom of the individual. Even the weakest of the weak, young and old can participate in it. A participation of this type makes the movement stronger and makes it collective, and community life happier. It is the nobler way. It makes people suffer voluntarily for the cause of truth and justice, and thus makes suffering sweeter. Thus religious dynamics of social change is the surest and the noblest means though not the swiftest.

Empirical studies conducted by sociologists have shown that social change can be effected in any society through the cultivation of new values and virtues. Religion prescribes the practice of certain values and virtues as the foundation of personal as well as social life. The possession of these virtues is considered to be the *sine qua non* of any progress—individual and social. It is the practice of virtues by individuals that creates in them a sense of duty and obligation towards one another and gives rise to feelings of love, mutual help, charity and service in society.

Social change can also be brought about through social service and education. Religions since the advent of Buddhism have been trying to reform society through service. Buddhism in ancient East and Christianity in the modern world introduced the element of social service in religion. They emphasized service to men as the best way of worshipping God. In many parts of India the dedicated service of missionaries helped to remove evils of the caste system. The present social position and prestige enjoyed by many of the backward communities, who were once treated as 'slaves' or serfs is largely the result of the work of Christian missionaries. The privileges of attending schools, visiting bazaars, drawing water from public wells, all these which were once prohibited for them was achieved by the missionaries. They were successful in creating in the minds of the downtrodden a sense of equality. This created movements for liberation among them and as a result the Government enacted laws against slavery thus

removing the legal barrier to individual freedom for all. Similarly, the service activities undertaken by the Brahmosamaj and Ramakrishna Mission helped to a great extent to ward off many of the social evils and thus brought about definite progress in many realms of social life.

### **Conclusion**

This analysis of some of the aspects of religion and society shows beyond doubt that religion can change society and social changes effected through religious ideas and ideals are different from social changes achieved through revolution and evolution. Both at the level of action and understanding, religion acts as a good instrument of social change. Acceptance of physical force or revolution as a method of transformation of man and society is not a sound and practicable weapon in modern society. It might lead to the destruction of society. Non-violence as a method of social change has become more relevant today than ever before. Religious dynamics of social change which aims simultaneously to change the individual and the society through non-violence, is better than either a purely collectivistic or a purely individualistic revolution.