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RELIGION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

There is no doubt that 'Religion', as commonly understood, has been one of the most powerful factors in civilizing humanity and in promoting human development. At the same time, history bears witness to its negative influence, or even its restrictive constraints, when institutionalised or organised as an instrument for exercising control and power over human beings and human society.

Before I deal with this subject in extenso, let me spell out the full significance of the words, 'Religion' and 'Human development' as I understand and use them here.

Every religion has two aspects: one is the belief, the credo, which is the theoretical aspect; the other is ritual, which is the practical aspect. The theoretical aspect comprises the principles and philosophy underlying the particular religion; the ritualistic aspect consists of the symbolic forms and formalities which are prescribed for the practice of that religion. Both are necessary to constitute what we call a 'Religion'. They are complementary to each other. A religion without the credo will lack the vital content and philosophical base, and the one without rituals will suffer without the helpful symbolism and the discipline essential for realisation and attainment of that the religion seeks to project. Religion is not just philosophy, which is essentially an intellectual exercise; nor is it just ritual, a mechanical or routine parade lacking meaning. Religion combines both these meaningfully and so helps to lead a human being along a certain path calculated to fulfil its highest aspirations.

Human development should, in my opinion, mean the fullest possible growth, the blossoming and flowering of the rich potentialities of a human being, consistent with similar development of his fellow-men in a given community as well as humanity as a whole. Man is essentially a social being, and opportunities

for development made available to one individual cannot and ought not to be denied to any other member of the human race. I have said, 'flowering' of the rich potentialities. I would add, 'fruiting' of those potentialities as well, meaning thereby the rendering back to the community by the individual, the benefits of his attainments in the form of self-less service, so that the cycle may be complete. This ensures the progress of the whole community by an in-built process of mutuality between the individual and the community.

What is it that is born when a human child is born, which is so different from the birth of any other animal? While the animal has a fixed routine future and death in the end, a human child is endowed with the potentiality of developing its physical, vital, mental, moral, aesthetical and spiritual energies, faculties and functions to a high degree in various ways. Man is a bundle of all these varied energies. They are at his command, and their proper and scientific development as well as fruitful use is a duty cast upon him by virtue of his being born as a human being.

During his life time, a man enriches his faculties by cultivating them and serving his kind. At the end, he leaves a legacy, unlike other animals, and lives in the continuing stream of human consciousness through his contribution and achievements.

If religion means anything, it should mean the performance and fulfilment of the above-mentioned duty. Failure to do so, or even neglect would mean lapse into animality and forfeiture of the status of being a human. Humanology, that is the science of man, should mean and have as its basis this important consideration as the guiding factor.

Leaving prehistoric man and his development aside for the present, we find that religion or something akin to it plays a significant part in the development of even the most primitive tribals around the globe. We call them primitive, and their religion likewise. It might be belief in a totem, it might be animism, it might be belief in ancestors who have passed away, it might be belief in deities of different potencies or it might be faith in oracles. We who have developed sophisticated ideas about religion, of what it means and what it should be, may call all such beliefs of the tribals as 'sub-religious', something not deserving to be termed as 'religion'. But we cannot deny to those beliefs the basic requirement of religion namely a belief in some power, some force which is beyond and above human power, which is super-natural and in essence spiritual, incorporeal and not material.

It is a belief in some force or power which cannot be treated like solid matter and used as such; which is ethereal in nature, but which is supposed to operate on its own for good or evil. The belief in the continuance of life after death, the worship or even the recognition of the fact that one's ancestors are still living in some form or other, is a crude kind of belief in spirituality, which modern materialistic sciences flatly reject.

Now spirituality, not spiritualism, is the essence of all religions, including those which deny the existence of God. Buddhism and Jainism do not believe in God as creator or as dispenser of Grace or anything of that kind. They believe, however, in Buddhahood and Arhathood, a status of the highest excellence and perfection a human consciousness can attain. They believe in consciousness, its purification and its capacity to reach the highest pinnacle—it is either Nirvana or Kaivalya.

I have been discussing, so far, the beliefs or the varied credo of the tribals. In addition, the tribals also have rituals which are baffling in their variety. It is from those roots that we who call ourselves religious have developed a variety of spiritual disciplines, in order to reach the highest pinnacle in conscious experience, the peace and blissful joy that never was on land or sea.

Many are the religions and their branches which have come and gone. Today however, there are just a few living religions and their denominations. Sanatana Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Shintoism, Sikhism and a few others are prominent among them. Some are faiths and have not fully attained the status of a religion. If we scan the history of all these religions and faiths, we find that invariably they have exercised profound influence on the minds and behaviour of large sections of human beings and have been instrumental in developing them into well-organised, vigorous communities, endeavouring to reach the highest in the spiritual, the moral, the ethical, the aesthetic, the social and material the spheres. Whatever religion or faith we take for examination to determine its part in human development from a primitive to a fairly cultured and civilized state, we always find that the most powerful incentive for development has come from the spiritual, the religious, or semi-religious and moral regions. Even a causal study of the origin of any religion or faith shows that it owes its birth to insights into the supreme spiritual powers ruling the universe which are ordinarily not apprehended the normal physical sense of man. The insights may be of one person or of a group of persons which

cumulatively make an impact on a large number of persons, and a religion gets born and is on its career.

In the beginning, the religion concerned lays down the Law for the faithful in all matters: spiritual, moral, ethical, social, and even economic. Thus religion begins as an integrated, inspiring and guiding force for the whole man and his total life, without any distinction between the spiritual and material, psychical and physical, religious and secular. Not only the soul or spirit or self of man but also the body, life, mind and all that constitutes the personality is subject in the beginning of all religions, to the rule laid down by the particular religion to which a person belongs. Therefore, it can be said without any fear of contradiction that all human development in its initial stages owes a great deal to some religion or the other. It is only later that other forces, incentives, ambitions, spirit of adventure, curiosity, scientific progress, etc., come into play. Even so, what is called the quality of life, the inner sustaining power, the armour against despair, failures and adversities, the moral fibre, the abiding faith in truth and justice are derived from what is essentially the religious or the spiritual fountainhead.

A study of the history and functioning of religions reveals that there was a time when the religious head was also the political head with socio-economic powers concentrated in him. To quote a living example, the Dalai Lama of Tibet is both the spiritual and temporal head of his people. But in the case of most other religions, as communities developed, as human activities multiplied and as human affairs became more complex there was a bifercation between religious and secular subjects. Sometimes, this division came about as the result of conflict between the kingly or political power and the authority of the church representing religion. The conflict between the King Henry VIII of England and the Catholic Church is a well-known example of this. The result was the birth of the Anglican Church which subserves the political power of the King of England. In India, in Hindu Polity, the tradition is that a King has to follow the Dharma, the Raj Dharma as laid down by the Shastras, the interpretation of which rests with the sages and seers like Vashishtha. Whatever might have been the charges in the inter-relationship of the religious and secular power in different countries at different times depending on the circumstances, there is no denying the fact that religion, spirituality, moral considerations have been exercising a deep and powerful influence on vast masses of mankind. Even

in purely secular, mundane and materialistic affairs, the influence of morality and ethics, which so far have been derivatives of religion and spiritual considerations, of truth and justice, is palpably visible and obvious.

It is in the twentieth century with its rapid advances in science, technology, and rationalism that we witness the erosion of religious, spiritual, moral and ethical considerations in the affairs of man and in his behaviour. Perhaps out of and through this clash between materialistic science and rationalism on the one hand and spirituality and morality on the other, a new balance and synthesis is being evolved. There are already signs of scientists developing a conscience in terms of humanism and humanology, and spiritual considerations are finding a base in modern science on account of quantum physics gradually becoming inexplicable without the help of metaphysical concepts.

We can say, therefore, that in the earlier stages of human progress, from primitive conditions, it was religion and its multi-faceted influence and inspiration which roused the creative forces dormant in man. The development of spirituality, of philosophical and moral thought, love of truth and justice, sense of brotherhood and urge for harmonious living were the outcome of the influence of religion. Early literature, art and architecture, the fine and graphic arts all drew their inspiration as well as themes from religion. The theories developed and skills acquainted as a result came in handy for the developing secular arts and activities. Indeed in the beginning stages, religion had the highest value and thousands shed their blood and sacrificed their all for the sake of religion.

Human development is not possible without the right atmosphere and favourable conditions. These conditions, obviously, are peace, orderliness, love of knowledge and truth, mutual help, sense of selfless service, regard for justice and fairplay, and so on. Now all these owe their origin and growth to one kind of religion or the other. In fact, all these are constituents of religion with faith in the transcendent spirit added on.

I cannot however close this brief article without mentioning some of the disservices rendered by narrow dogmatic ideas about one's own religion, by institutionalised religion in some cases, and restraints refused many a time freedom of conscience and thought in the name of religion. History is replete with instances of this kind, more so, the history of Europe.

Truth like science cannot afford to be dogmatic. The quest for truth is an eternal one and honest pursuit of it, with equal freedom to others to pursue it, is the noblest way. Dogma, understood absolute and unconditional, freezes and petrifies truth and unfortunately turns it into a fossil.

When Religion becomes a rigid institution, it seeks to order about and finds sanctions for enforcing its dogmas and orders. This comes in the way of the freedom of thought and expression of its followers. The worst example of it was the Spanish and the Portuguese Inquisitions which used to burn the victims in public after trials of some sort. It is this attitude which also came in the way of free expression of scientific truth as in the case of Galileo.

Apart from the need for religion for spiritual and religious life, a life dedicated solely and predominantly to inner peace and soul-satisfaction, even for leading an ordinary life in the pursuit of worldly goods and normal pleasures of the flesh, the virtues which owe their origin to religion and religious disciplines are necessary to strengthen the heart and fortify the mind to stand up to storms and stresses which are common in the lives of all human beings. Thus religion plays a very significant role in the development of man from the stage of being a primitive animal to one who is probing the mysteries of nature to gain mastery over the material world and attempting to resolve his own inner contradictions.