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## The Unifying Force of True Religion

I deem it a great privilege to have been invited to inaugurate this conference which has as its theme, "Role of Religion in National Integration". It is also appropriate and very gratifying that a discussion on this very important topic, which is of vital concern for the welfare of mankind and the preservation of man's culture and spiritual heritage, has been arranged on this occasion.

### I

All our great spiritual masters had dedicated the best part of their lives to elevate and save men by helping them to come out of their day-to-day petty and selfish life of the material world and step into the higher way of divine life by following a system of integrated spiritual discipline based on love, sacrifice and service. By this process, the consciousness which in its original form was confined to the limited separate selves is enabled to expand itself, grow out of its narrow individual concerns and spread out and express itself in acts of sympathy, love and harmony, thus fostering a universal sense of unity and brotherhood. In short, the appetite for sexual pleasures, meanness and selfishness are eliminated from the human mind and the personality becomes charged with the purest love towards all and filled with a keen desire to lead a noble life of service and sacrifice. This, I submit is the precise role of religion in relation to the life and work of men.

Religion has been identified with feeling, emotion, sentiment, instinct, profession, belief and faith. The truth, however, is that all the religions owe their inspiration to the personal insight of their founders. The Hindu religion, for example, is characterized by its adherence to facts. In its pure form it generates. It never leaned

entirely as other religions do, on authority. It is not a founded religion. Nor does it centre round any historical events. Its distinctive characteristic has been its insistence on the inward life of the spirit. To know, profess and be the spirit in this physical frame, to convert an obscure plodding mentality into a clear spiritual illumination, to build peace and self-reliant freedom in the stress of emotional satisfaction and sufferings, to discover and realize the life divine in a body subject to sickness and death. This has been the constant endeavour of the Hindu religion.

The Hindus look back to the Vedic period as an epoch of their founders. The Vedic vision and wisdom are the accepted ways for attaining the highest spiritual truth of which the human mind is capable. It is the work of the Rishis. The truth of the Rishis was not evolved as a result of logical reasoning, or systematic philosophy, but it is the product of their spiritual intuition—*drishti* or 'vision'. The Rishis were not so much the authors of the truth recorded in the Vedas, as the *seers* who were able to discern the eternal truth by raising their life-spirit to the plane of the universal spirit. They were the pioneer researchers in the light of the spirit who saw more in the world than the existing contemporary fellow human beings. Their utterances are based not on a transitory vision, but on a continuous experience of abiding life on earth. When the Vedas are regarded as the highest authority, all that is meant is that the most exacting authority is the authority of true fact.

If experience is the soul of religion, expression is the body through which it fulfils its destiny. We have their spiritual facts and their interpretations by which they are communicated to others: the *Sṛuti*, what is heard, and the *Smṛuti*, what is remembered. Shankara equates them with *prathyaksha* or "intuition" and *anumāna* or "inference". It is thus a distinction between immediacy and thought. Intuitions abide while interpretations change. *Sṛuti* earlier, was the authority of facts, and *Smṛuti*, the authority of interpretation: Theory, speculation, dogma, change from time to time as the facts become better understood. Their values derive from their adequacy to experience. When forms dissolve and interpretations are doubted, it is a call to get back to the experience itself, and live formally in its contents in more suitable terms to meet the challenges of the existing circumstances.

While the experiential character of religion thus emphasizes the Hindu faith, every religion at its best calls on it for self-validation. Coming to Buddhism, the whole theme of this great religion centres on Buddha's experience of enlightenment. Turn to Moses. Moses saw God in the burning bush, and Elijah heard the still gentle voice. In Jeremiah we read: "This is the covenant which I have made with the house of Israel of those days, says the Lord. I have put my hand in their inward part and in their heart will I write it." The experience of God on the part of Jesus is the basic fact for Christianity. I quote: "As he came up out of the river, he saw the heavens parted above him and the spirit descending like a dove towards him. And He heard a voice sounding out of the heaven, and saying, 'thou art my beloved son, I have chosen thee' ". According to St Mark the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan was the occasion of a vivid and intense religious experience, so much so that he felt that he had to go for a time into absolute solitude to ponder it. He obviously spoke of the ineffable agony, the sudden revelation, the new peace and joy in words that had come down to him. He exults in the newness of the reborn soul as something which marks him off from all those religious who get such experiences only a second hand: "Verily I say unto you, among men born of women, there has not arisen a greater than John the Baptist; but the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than him". The vision that came to Saul on the road to Damascus that turned the persecutor into an Apostle is another illustration. Faith means, according to St James, the Apostle, acceptance of dogma. In St Paul, it is the surrender of one's heart and mind to Christ.

The life of Mohammed, the Prophet, is full of mysterious experience. We see that the personal experience is not confined to the East. Socrates and Plato, Augustine and Dante, Bunyan, Wesley, and a number of others testify to the felt reality of God. It is as old as humanity and is not confined to any people. The evidence is too massive to run away from. We find that religion is the assent of man to express his notion of a perfect being, a perfect world and a means by which he can be redeemed from the fact to the most sublime experience of pure ideality. The present unrest that is manifest all over the world, it is clear, is caused as much by the ineffectiveness of religion, its failure to promote the best life, as by the insistent pressure of new knowledge on traditional beliefs.

## II

There are a few intellectual snobs with whom it seems to be an accomplishment to ridicule religion. To care for religion is to be old-fashioned. To be critical of it is to be "modern". Scepticism does not cost much. It is faith that requires courage. Notwithstanding the transformation of life, the shifting noble values with one's preoccupation with the times, the primal craving of man for the eternal and the abiding remains inextinguishable. Unbelief is impossible. Along with the deep discontent with the standardized forms of religion, there is a growing seriousness about it. The wants are diminishing, but the basic needs persist. Never was there need for man to come to an understanding with life more urgent than it is now. We may be busy seeking for wealth, power and excitement; but we are no longer sure that all this is worth doing. We have no certain goals and no definite aims. Life is fragmentary and futile. Nothing means much or matters much. Anxious and enquiring minds are doubting and discussing; groping and seeking for the more precious and lasting meaning of life, with profound yearning for the sympathy, a value which will comprehend the scepticism and the uncertainties, the doubts and the realities, of contemporary life.

What we wish for is vital religion, a life-philosophy which will reconstruct the true nature of conviction and revive a scheme of life which man can follow with self-respect and creative joy. Salvation tells us that the trained understanding is not distracted by details or divided in aims. It has the sense of the whole, and the integrity of life which helps us to face the gravest crisis with perfect equanimity. It is the function of the philosophy of Religion to provide it with a spiritual rallying centre, a 'synoptic vision' as Plato loves to call it, a *samanvaya* as the Hindu scholars put it, a philosophy which will serve as a spiritual concordant, which will free the spirit of religion from the disintegrating influence of doubt, and make the warfare of creeds and sects a thing of the past. By the true and faithful pursuit of the Godward path, the tensions of normal life disappear, yielding place to inward peace, power and joy. The Indian *shanti*-peace-represents this positive feeling of calm and equanimity, and the absence of frustration. The experience is felt as profoundly satisfying, where darkness is turned into light, sadness into joy, despair into assurance. The continuance of such an experience gives one the feeling of dwell-

ing in heaven, which is not a place where God lives, but a mode of being which is fully and completely real.

On this occasion, my thoughts naturally go to the famous and most historic address delivered by Swami Vivekananda at the Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893. The main theme on which he laid stress in that discourse was the divinity of the soul, the non-duality of the Godhead and the harmony of Religions. In the final session of the Parliament, Swami Vivekananda said in the concluding part of his speech :

The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Muslim, nor is a Hindu or Buddhist to become a Christian. Each one assimilates the spirit of the others and yet preserves its individuality and grows according to his own law of growth. If the Parliament of Religion has shown anything to the world, it is this. It has proved that holiness, purity and charity are not exclusive possessions of any one religion in the world and that every system has produced men and women of the most exotic character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of one particular religion and the destruction of the other, I pity him from the bottom of my heart and point out to him that, whatever be the banner, every religion will soon be hidden in spite of the resistance. Help and not fight. Assimilation and not destruction. Harmony and peace and not dissension.

The need of the present time is that all those who believe in God and are interested in the preservation and restoration of moral and spiritual values in life, should come together and work in close co-operation and harmony for the establishment of a true welfare state, based on the principle of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. If this be done, we can achieve not only national integration, but also the ideal of one world founded on universal brotherhood. I would like to conclude by saying that there is only one religion, the religion of love; there is only one caste, the caste of humanity; there is only one language, the language of the heart; there is only one God, He is Omnipresent.