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## LIMITS OF WORSHIP IN INDIAN RELIGIONS

For many, religion is the way one *relates* oneself to a personal creator-God, and this relation must express itself in worship. In this sense, worship has become a defining factor of religion. Worship is here understood as a means on the one hand of expressing one's loyalty to God, on the other of achieving one's ultimate goal in life, namely, salvation. Or, in general, worship may be taken to mean the very religious attitude of man so that to think of a religion without worship is an obvious contradiction in terms. Similarly, in this line of thinking, it is almost impossible to understand a religion which sets limits to worship. On the contrary, worship has become almost the measuring rod of religiosity: one is religious to the extent to which one worships.

The fact that the element of worship in religion can become degenerated, and that such degenerated forms of worship have always been condemned by the religious leaders is not ignored. Thus, for example, Moses warned against the idolatrous worship of the golden calf and insisted on the worship of the living God; Christ denounced the exaggerated emphasis on the external rituals and called for the worship of God in spirit and truth; Mohammed condemned all forms of worship which were directed to any god but the God. Therefore, when I say that 'one is religious to the extent to which one worships', I have in mind the genuine sort of worship which is invariably an expression of one's subordination to the true, living, God.

The worship does not mean any sort of ritual that is intended to create a certain supernatural experience, such as various physical and mental exercises recommended by the yogins. They may be taken to form part of the ritual dimension of religion, as advocated by Prof. N. Smart. He classifies them as 'pragmatic (aimed at the attainment of certain experiences) as distinct from sacred

rituals (directed towards a holy being, such as God)'.<sup>1</sup> But they are not worship in themselves, for they make no reference to a personal creator-God. Therefore, again, when I say that worship is an essential part of religions, I mean worship *proper*, which is necessarily an expression of one's dependence on a personal creator-God.

Thus, the Middle-eastern religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—have worship of a personal creator-God as the very core of human religiosity. Here a student of religion is tempted to ask whether worship has got to be an essential element of religion as such. The answer would depend on what religion is, as such. In the West religion as such would mean the relation of man to God on a personal level. This understanding of religion as such will inevitably demand worship of God on the part of man. But, does this understanding of religion go for all religions, including the Oriental ones? The answer is in the negative. For example, some of the Indian religious traditions do not always understand religion in terms of man's relation to God on a personal level. For them religion as such would mean the way one *orientates oneself*. 'Orientating oneself' should be understood literally to mean 'finding out about one's position or situation'. If one starts with the belief in a personal creator-God, then worship necessarily becomes the means of 'orientating oneself'. But, as is well-known, some Indian religious thinkers do not always start with belief in a personal creator-God. More often than not, they start with an open denial of a personal creator-God. In such cases the presupposition is either absolute monism, or absolute pluralism. If absolute monism is presupposed, then 'orientating oneself' would mean realizing one's identity with the monistic reality. On the other hand, if absolute pluralism is presupposed, then 'orientating oneself' would mean realizing one's absolute unrelatedness. In either case there is no place whatsoever for worship, which presupposes the dependence of the creatures on the creator-God, and the dependence of man on the personal creator-God. If such dependence is presupposed, however, then 'orientating oneself' would mean realizing that dependence through worship.

Again, it is a well-known fact that belief in a personal creator-God is not a part of religious orthodoxy for an Indian. In other words, even a non-theist, if not an atheist, can very well be a reli-

1. Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (London: 1971), p. 1.

gious man in the Indian tradition. In Hinduism the minimum requirement for orthodoxy is the acceptance of the Scriptures as the infallible source of truth, no matter how one interprets them, theistically, non-theistically or atheistically. Thus the followers, of *Advaita-vedanta*, who do not believe in a personal creator-God, are still considered to be genuinely orthodox Hindus. They accept the infallible nature of the Scriptures, which they interpret non-theistically, if not atheistically. Similarly, the Sāṃkhya system, which, also, does not believe in a personal creator-God, is considered an orthodox system, just because it does not call into question the infallible character of the Scriptures. Buddhism and Jainism are unorthodox systems for the Hindus, not because these systems are either atheistic or non-theistic, but because they refuse to accept the Hindu Scriptures as infallible sources of truth. However, they are genuinely religious systems in their own right, although they do not believe in a personal creator-God. Thus belief in a personal creator-God is not a defining mark of religion in the Indian context. Consequently, neither can worship, which will make sense only with reference to a personal creator-God, be considered a defining mark of religion in the Indian context.

In the light of what has been said above, it may be noted that the term 'religion', etymologically meaning 'relation' cannot be strictly used to describe the non-theistic systems such as Buddhism, Jainism, Sāṃkhya and Advaita-vedanta, for they do not believe in establishing or maintaining a personal relation between God and man. Therefore, if the term 'religion' is retained to cover those systems along with the theistic ones, it is only for the sake of convenience. In fact no system in India, including the theistic ones, calls itself 'religion.' As it is, the Indian languages do not have just one term to convey the technical sense of 'religion'. There the terms used to describe people whom a Westerner might call religious men, are usually '*ṛṣi*' (= a man of insight), '*yogi*' (= a man of concentration) and '*saṃnyāsi*' (= a man of renunciation). This indicates that for an Indian religious endeavours are aimed mainly at acquiring 'insight' (*darśana*) into reality, or at bringing one's own energies together (*yoga*) or at getting rid (*saṃnyāsa*) of this worldly distractions. This explains why worship, which aims at establishing or improving the personal relationship between God and man, gains little or no importance in the context, of these Indian systems.

According to the Sāṃkhya system the present life is characterized by the ignorance of one's own identity. This system recognizes

two principles: *purusa* and *prakṛti* the former is the self, which belongs to the spiritual level, and the latter is the limiting substance belonging to the material level of existence. *Puruṣa* loses sight of its own identity, and mistakes the functions of *prakṛti* for its own. This is basically the bondage to which one is subjected in the present state of existence. All religious endeavours, therefore, aim at breaking down this bondage, and thus at discovering, or rather recovering, one's identity. Hence all religious practices are directed primarily towards enabling oneself to recognize the clear distinction between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, which will eventually help one orientate oneself.'

What interests a student of religion here is the fact that in the attempt of 'orientating himself' the Sāṃkhyan recognizes no assistance from outside, let alone from a creator-God. What is more, even if he would like to have the assistance of some one, there is nobody who can really help him. He believes that the *puruṣa-prakṛti* complex makes up the entire reality, and that, therefore, anything that happens is the sole responsibility of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, jointly or individually. It is just the *puruṣa* who gets himself mixed up with *prakṛti*, and it is up to him, and up to him alone, to sort out the mixing up. Or, rather, it is just the individual man, who in the present condition is a mixture of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, who is responsible for his bondage as well as liberation. Neither God, because there is no God for him, nor his fellow-men, because they are in the same boat as he, can really help him.

In this context the idea of worship as a means of attaining his goal in life will make no sense to the Sāṃkhyan. The only means available to him are meditation and other yogic practices, for which he may receive the expert guidance of a master, *guru*. It should be remembered, however, that the role of a *guru* is nothing like that of a priest nor of a saviour-God. Similarly, the yogic techniques should not be mistaken for any kind of religious worship. Thus all vestiges of worship are far removed from the tradition of the Sāṃkhyan system.

Incidentally, what is the Sāṃkhyan goal of life? Is there any hope of overcoming one's loneliness, at least after the realization of one's identity? Once again the answer is in the negative! The realized state of existence is here characteristically called *kaivalya*, aloofness. It is primarily aloofness from *prakṛti*, and for all practical purposes it is aloofness from everything conceivable, as well! Consequently, religiosity for the Sāṃkhyan would mean a process of undoing all possible relations. As it is, this is just the opposite

of what religion means in the theistic tradition. Thus the aim of religion being the undoing of all possible relations, there is no point in advocating the worship of God, which is conceived as an effective means of establishing and maintaining the relationship between man and God.

The story is not much different in Jainism. It does not believe in a creator-God. The universe, and everything in it, is equally eternal. It is not only that there is no God, but that the very idea of a creator-God is self-contradictory. The act of creation would imply on the part of God that he lacks something, which is inconsistent with the notion of God as the perfect being. Therefore there is no God, and there cannot be a creator-God at all. Instead, there is a plurality of individuals, all of whom are potential gods of equal status. The power of *karma* is brought in to explain one's experience of limitation and suffering in this life. The human history is controlled and directed solely by this power of *karma*, not by a provident God. That means, it is entirely up to the individual to shape his future, this way or that way. To realize his own identity all he needs to do is to follow conscientiously a certain prescribed way of life. On the contrary, it is no use for him to wait for God to lead him to his destiny. In this sense there is no place for the worship of God either.

However, the Jains do have places of worship. In fact they are famous for their architectural beauty, but they are not places for the worship of God conceived as the supreme being. They are, instead, used for the worship of the already liberated individuals, who are called Ford-makers (*tirtham-karas*). They are so called because they are believed to help the devotees cross the sea of life. This idea of the liberated individuals coming to the assistance of their worshippers is not, however, in agreement with the description of the former. They are described, for example, as incapable of any activity, or rather as motionless. Hence, the worship of the Ford-makers is not to be taken seriously. It may well be an allowance made for the sentimentality of the common man. Or, at the most it may be an expression of a vague belief in what the Christians call 'the communion of saints'. At any rate, it does not suggest the idea of man entering into a relationship with a creator-God, which would in turn justify the practice of worship proper.

A third case for a 'religion without worship' is Buddhism. It is well-known that Gautama the Buddha started his religious search by rejecting the Hindu sacrifices and rituals. He found

them all empty and meaningless. Even the extreme sort of Hindu asceticism was not acceptable to him. He came to the conclusion that it is neither sacrifice nor worship nor self-torture that leads one to the final enlightenment. The middle path that he suggested consisted of right conviction, right resolve, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right thought, and right concentration. It should be particularly noted that this list does not include the worship of God.

The Buddha wisely avoided the very question of God. He did not claim to be God himself. He did not preach a God worthy of man's worship; all he did was to show a path which he thought would definitely lead one to enlightenment. He did not ask his disciples to trust in God, nor even in him, as Christ asked his disciples. Instead, the Buddha asked his disciples to trust in themselves: "...be ye lamps unto yourselves. Rely on yourselves, and do not rely on external help... Seek salvation alone in the truth. Look not for assistance to any one besides yourselves" (*Mahaparinibbana Suttana*). Thus, Buddhism, as the Buddha envisaged it, does not at all entertain the hope that one's efforts towards enlightenment shall be blessed by God, who can be led to do so by offering worship. Instead, each individual has to work out his salvation himself, through self-reliance, not by the grace of God, nor under the guidance of an external authority, not even of a *guru*, who can only show the path. Therefore, the Buddha insisted that his listeners should not accept even his teaching without testing it for themselves.

Thus self-reliance is the key-word in the Buddhist spirituality. It is backed up by a corresponding metaphysics, too, which systematically shatters the myth of 'universals', 'relations', 'continuity' etc., to say the least. That is, according to the Buddha, what is real is the particular, unique, mutually unrelated, momentary, individuals, and, therefore, the concepts of 'universal', 'relation', 'continuity' etc., are all mental constructs. These latter wrong concepts are the roots of all passion (*trṣṇā*), which in turn give rise to suffering (*duḥkha*). So the final freedom would consist in getting rid of those concepts, and thus blowing out (*nirvāṇa*) of all passions. This, therefore, amounts to saying that the religious pursuits, far from being attempts to relate oneself to God and one's fellow-men, seek gradually to destroy one's belief in any sort of relation with any being. Thus once again the religious ideal appears to be utter aloofness or loneliness! This is nothing

but total disaster to the elaborate Hindu system of worship and rituals.

It is also interesting to note how the Buddha has described the realized state of existence. He called it *nirvāṇa*, which means 'blowing out' of all relations and passions arising therefrom. That means, he did not want to keep his followers under the illusion that they are eventually moving towards a personal union with a higher being. On the other hand, according to him, uniqueness of each individual, his total unrelatedness to, and independence from, other individuals, are the ideals one should strive for, not union, nor relation, nor dependence. If so, worship, which is based on the concept of relation, communion and dependence, can only prevent one from achieving one's ideal! What a Buddhist is after, is enlightenment, not union with God.

I am not overlooking the historical fact that some later schools of Buddhism developed more on theistic lines, building up a whole system of the worship of the Buddha as the supreme Being. But that is not the point at issue in this article. What I am trying to establish here is the fact that Buddhism in its original inspiration was a 'religion without worship'! The Buddha not only refused to endorse the Hindu worship of God, but also rejected the honour of being worshipped as God.

A last instance of 'religion without worship', which I want to examine, is the *advaita-vedānta* founded by Sri Samkara of south India. It is, as the name suggests, a strictly monistic system of thought, and is presented by way of interpreting the Hindu Scriptures. The basic doctrine is that 'reality is one, and one only', so that all talk about an Other as the object of worship or realization becomes meaningless. Plurality and distinctions are all only apparent, and they will totally disappear when the final realization arises. The whole trouble is that man as he is today, is ignorant of the monistic character of Being, and also of the fact that he is himself that One Being.

This is the bondage of man from the advaitic point of view. Hence, liberation (*mokṣa*) of man consists in his overcoming of that ignorance, and getting to realize once for all that he is identical with One Being. However, worship of God is not the right means to counteract ignorance or to attain to the final realization of one's own identity. Worship of God is indeed an impossible concept, because one cannot imagine a God other than oneself. In the place of worship and other theistic practices, Samkara has

recommended a five-point programme of discipline: cultivation of the ability to discriminate between the transitory and permanent, total detachment, tranquillity of mind, self-restraint and an intense desire to be liberated. Just as in the disciplinary scheme of Buddhism there was no mention of worship, so here too, there is no mention of it. That ignorance can be removed only by acquiring knowledge is the central principle in *advaita-vedānta*. So the entire programme of discipline is meant to create the necessary mental and physical disposition in the individual for the awakening of his consciousness to higher levels of reality. Here, too, it is important that the final target of all religious discipline is just liberation (*mokṣa*), not union with God, for the advaitin believes that liberation from ignorance is all that is needed for him to attain to the realization of his identity. In theistic traditions, liberation from sin, for example, leads to slavery to God, so to speak. In the advaitic tradition, on the contrary, liberation from ignorance is total liberation, which entails no sort of limitation whatsoever.

However, Samkara has made ample concessions to the sentimental needs of the common man. In other words, he recognized the worship of God in one form or another as a psychological need of the unenlightened men, and he was aware, too, of the immense emotional satisfaction and confidence such worship brings them. So he thought that there was no point in forcing his impersonal sort of religious ideal equally on everybody. Therefore, he made some adjustments within his system so as to accommodate the idea of a personal creator-God and the worship of him. This he did by distinguishing between a higher form of spirituality and a lower form of it. People following the former are the elites who can straight away aim at the monistic ideal of existence. They are people who already have overcome the human sentimentality and emotional needs. People who follow the lower form of spirituality are those who have not yet been able to come to terms with the impersonal, monistic, concept of reality. They still feel the need for clinging to a personal God through worship and rituals. As far as these people are concerned, the concept of a personal creator-God (Iswara) is a valid one, and the worship of him is a useful means of coming to religious maturity. But they should try eventually to rise high up to the level of the monistic ideal of spirituality, and give up the petty theistic interests. In other words, the theistic form of religion with its belief in a personal creator-God and the worship of him, is only a passing phase of one's religiosity, which should eventually give

way to the monistic religion, in which there is no room for worship. Thus, for Saṅkara, the ultimate form of religion is without worship.

The conclusion arrived at from the above study is that the tendency to undermine the theistic claims and the value of worship as a means of 'orientating oneself' is very strong in Indian tradition. This tendency is not a denial of the supernatural, nor a denial of the spiritual dimension of man. On the contrary, it is the highest form of supernaturalism and the firmest recognition of human spirituality. If so, one starts wondering if religion has always got to be theistic, and if worship of God has got to be an essential characteristic of religion at all. While raising these questions, one should keep in mind, however, that none of the above-mentioned non-theistic systems has succeeded in keeping its followers completely away from the element of worship. At one stage or another, they revert to the belief in a personal God of one form or another, and to the traditional form of worship as a means of attaining to the religious ideal. Even the Sāṅkhya system, which cleverly avoided every form of worship from its doctrinal structure, later seems to have looked sympathetically upon the image of the personal God presented by its sister-system, Yoga, and to have unconsciously endorsed the worship of that God at least as a means of concentration and meditation. The Jains, too, in spite of their utter individualism, could not resist the temptation to build places of worship for the Ford-makers. Buddhism, at least at some stages of its history, has given way to theism and the consequent worship of God in the person of Buddha. Finally, Sri Saṅkara, one of the staunchest advocates of monism the world has ever seen, has deliberately admitted the need for the worship of a personal God if only for a short period of one's growth in spirituality. So, it seems that the idea of a personal creator-God and the need to worship him in trust and love, forces itself on man in spite of himself.