

Religion for the transformation of man to MAN: Human to the DIVINE

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Religion is just one aspect of man's life along with Science. But yet, one can see how it has affected the life of man, both positively and negatively. How and why? What is the reason? Is this feature inherent to religion? Or has it been acquired by men over a period of time on account of the methodology adopted by him in the practice of religion? Thus this paper tries to study this aspect in order to promote the hypothesis that religion actually intends to transform or elevate 'man' to 'MAN' (borrowing the difference made between 'being' and 'Being' by Martin Heidegger). Moreover, today's intellectuals and seekers of religion along with political and social analysts speak in terms of religious pluralism and acceptance of all religions. There are also others like Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda who emphasise on the oneness of the divine, addressed by various names and worshipped in various forms (including the formless). Remember the declaration in the Rg Veda - "*ekam sat viprah bahuda vadanti*" – truth is one but wise men call it differently. True to this statement, one finds that all religions are nothing but paths to attain divinity or re-claim the divinity. But then why is there the difference in the name of religion itself?

Swami Vivekananda once said:

Nothing has made more for peace and love than religion; nothing has engendered fiercer hatred than religion. Nothing has made the brotherhood of man more tangible than religion; nothing has bred more bitter enmity between man and man than religion¹.

However, he reiterates, in another instance thus:

When a kettle of water is coming to the boil, if you watch the phenomenon, you find first one bubble rising, and then another and so on, until at last, they join, and a tremendous commotion takes place. This world is very similar. Each individual is like a bubble, and the nations, resemble many bubbles. Gradually, these nations are joining, and I am sure the day will come when separation will vanish and that one-ness to which we are all going will become manifest. A tremendous stream is flowing towards the ocean carrying us all along with it, and though like straws and scraps of paper we may at times float aimlessly about, in the long run we are sure to join the ocean of life and bliss².

¹Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, vol.2., p.359

² Ibid. P. 188

These two views are juxtaposed here in order to show how the practitioners of religion today have landed themselves in conflict arising out of their stand on plurality. How best can one address and redeem himself from this tendency of plurality of religions and its resultant conflicts? Swami Vivekananda has shown the way through his understanding of religion as spirituality and his call for a combined knowledge that is spiritual as well as secular. He also recognized the need for the most important ingredients of spirituality, namely, LOVE and *SEVA* (loosely translated as service). *SEVA* is nothing but the total dedication of one's activity for the other which again is possible only with LOVE for the other and God in the form of the other. These two – LOVE AND *SEVA* – will transform man from his state of animality and humanity to that of DIVINITY.

Etymologically, the English term 'religion' is derived from the Latin word *religio* meaning "reverence (for the gods)".

- (i) There is this **Latin word *re* (again) + *ligare* (to connect)**. That is, a re-connection with the divine. This definition was made prominent by St Augustine and it seems to be the most favoured among the modern day scholars.
- (ii) Swami Vivekananda said: "fear of God is the beginning of religion, but the love of God is the end of religion"³
- (iii) William James defines religion as "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual man in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine"⁴

William James' understanding of religion reflects his belief in the involvement of various dimensions of human life in religion. Simultaneously, the emphasis on solitude echoes the subjective and personal dimension too.

- (iv) Dr. S. Radhakrishnan's definition of religion seems quite relevant here. According to him, "religion is not mere intellectual conformity or ceremonial piety; it is spiritual adventure"⁵. It is, indeed, a sojourn into the spiritual life.

All these existing definitions can, at best, be regarded as recommendations with an evaluative tone. While some definitions recommend morality as the core of religions, others do not look at it like that. Similarly, some definitions highlight the personal nature of God while belief in personal deities does not figure in other definitions. However, man understands religion in three ways:

- (i) **Sacramental religion**– which locates the divine in the animate and inanimate things
- (ii) **Prophetic religion** – which identifies the manifestation of divinity in human society and
- (iii) **Mystical religion** – which centres on mystical experience.

However it is not possible to delink one religion from the other on this basis alone because one may find overlapping of these tendencies in them. For instance, Islam (predominantly prophetic) developed the most extreme group of mystics called the sufis; likewise, Buddhism (another prophetic religion) has blossomed into a sacramental religion in Tibet. Myanmar etc. Similarly, while popular Hinduism is sacramental, Swami Vivekananda's brand of universal religion, namely Vedanta, is mystical.

³ *Ibid*, vol VI p.71

⁴ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 51

⁵ S. Radhakrishnan, *Religion and Culture* [Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1968], p. 9

The task on hand is to re-read religion as such in line with the pronouncements of some of these recent thinkers in order to understand the essential meaning of religion, and **which shows how religion helps man to transcend from his basic nature of animality to divinity through humanity**. Animality is what man possesses while human nature is what he is supposed to exhibit in mundane life. However, it should be reiterated that the nature of man is not restricted to these two alone, as there is the other dimension, namely, the spiritual or divinity to which man constantly projects. Man, according to *Vedānta*, is the manifestation of the real (that is, *brahman*). Recent Indian thinkers have taken clue from this and emphasized that man should realize his true nature. This understanding of the true nature of man as an integral part of the supreme along with locating him in the society is the result of a re-reading of religion by Swami Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan and others. How could these thinkers re-read successfully? It is in this context that two of the three *mārgas*⁶ – namely, *bhakti*, and *karma* – help these thinkers in two ways; (1) to enable man realize his true nature and (2) which also guides him to perform his duty to the other. If realizing oneself as part of the supreme is characterized as spiritual, then the need of the hour today is spiritual humanism, and this ideal seems to be the goal of such thinkers. Today's man can be characterized in the following manner: man of emotion, man of action, and man of knowledge. The man of emotion seeks union between man and God, while the man of action aims at union between man and the whole of humanity and the man of knowledge seeks to understand the unity of all existence. *Vedānta*, as understood by these thinkers, should cater to all three types of men. Hence, Swami Vivekananda and many of these thinkers have reiterated these two – *bhakti* and *karma* – alongside *jñāna*.

The path of devotion is advocated by these thinkers not as a replacement for *jñāna*. One can see how these two paths have been intertwined in their utterances through certain examples. Saint Tyagaraja, well known for his Carnatic compositions (*krithis*)⁷, intends to plead Rama for protection – namely, “*Rama nannu brovara*”. Yet another line from this same composition extols the oneness of reality thus: “*cheemalo brahmalo Siva keshavādulalo ...*”, extolling the oneness of existence in an insignificant ant to that of the cosmos. Here, he seems to unravel the mystery of the reality while praying to that reality. Subrahmanya Bharathi, of Tamil Nadu, writes in one of his vedāntic poems thus:

Ethilum ingu iruppaan avan yaaro

Yenakkul avan iruppaan arivaayo

That is, he wants people to understand that the one present in him is the same present everywhere. But this line of oneness with reality should not be seen as a stray thought. Hence, he brings it along with his explanation of that real as the one who is responsible for everything in the world – be it river or mountain etc., and yet unknowable⁸. These

⁶ *Mārga* is translated as path and the three paths are *bhakti*, *karma* and *jñāna* devotion, action and wisdom.

⁷ Most of these compositions are either in praise of Rama or seeking refuge in Rama, as songs sung by one who is deeply in devotion to Rama. However, one can find expositions of the oneness of reality spread in such compositions.

⁸ ThavazhumNathiyaiTharitthaMudiyaan

AdiyumMudiyumAriyaMudiyaan

EliyaAdiyarOthumVethaNaathamAaghi..

views are no less different from Swami Vivekananda's understanding of this advaitic oneness to be the rationale for the codes of morality and ethics.

Take, for instance, the first few verses in the 9th chapter of *Pañcadasi*⁹, (titled “the lamp of meditation”). These verses talk of two kinds of error – “leading or informative error” and misleading error”. Two examples are given here. First example deals with a man identifying the light coming from a lamp as that of a gem and the other example dealing with a man taking the light emanating from a gem to be that of the gem. The one who pursues the light of the lamp will never get the gem while the man who pursues the light of gem may get it. However, both are mistakes – mistaking the light of the lamp as gem is “misleading error” while mistaking the light of the gem for the gem is “leading or informative error”. Both notions are equally wrong; yet, results are different. Here, the identification of gem with the light of the gem is no doubt a leading error but yet, can be accepted as it leads to the desired right knowledge. Similarly, *bhakti* of the individual to that of which he is a part is definitely a leading error (when seen from the fact that it separates man from the divine, of which he is a part). However, it can be accepted as a tool for the realization of the true nature of man and, which takes to another aspect – that is, man's duty to not only redeem himself but also his fellow beings. It is pertinent to note Swami Vivekananda's call here: “I shall call you religious from the day you begin to see God in men and women ...”¹⁰ There are three tasks that religion should perform today, as suggested by Swami Budhananda.¹¹ They are:

- (i) to construct a supranational cohesive humanity
- (ii) to give a purposive direction to the whole process of civilization
- (iii) to deepen the spiritual consciousness of the individual

This paper highlights the last of the task along with the first. In other words, it attempts to re-read religion as exhorting man to understand his deeper consciousness while acknowledging the supranational cohesiveness of humanity.

Hence *bhakti marga* is coupled with yet another *mārga* by these thinkers – *karma* or path of action as evinced in the act of serving the *mādhava in man*. Swami Parivrajikashuddhatmaprana, after discussing the *sādhanas of Sri Ramakrishna*, concludes that it was all about attaining the state of *vijñāna* (seeing the Divine everywhere). He writes: “Ramakrishna's *sādhanas* and realisations were ultimately about seeing God in all beings – and loving God in all beings. Again and again, in the *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* or in the *Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*, we find evidence of this. He literally worshipped human beings, that is, worshipped them as God in human form”¹². He has asked why he should not worship God through human form if he can worship God through clay. This is visible in his actions, be it cleaning the toilet in the house of another person or taking away the used leaf plates etc., that

⁹Verse 1-6 of *Pancadasi of Sri Vidyananda Swami*, p.377-8 English translation by Swami Swahananda (also pointed out by S.Radhakrishnan, Op.Cit., pp. 377-379.)

¹⁰ **Collected works of Swami Vivekananda. vol. II, p. 326**

¹¹ *The Saving Challenge of Religion*, p. 57

¹²OP.Cit., p. 30

were done at a time when the society was steeped in prejudices and caste issues and when he himself was warned of being ostracized. But that was the way in which he decided to serve His Divine mother. This idea is echoed in the words of Swami Vivekananda's call for *Vedānta* as universal religion which says, "doing good to others is the one great, universal religion"¹³. Swami Vivekananda emphasized on two aspects of religion – **to be good and to do good**.

This principle is again echoed in Saint Ramalingam (commonly referred to as Vallalar in Tamil). He **wanted to eradicate the difference between man and man. Hence he preached the path of suddha sanmārgam (society of pure truth)**. According to him, adherence to this path will result in a peaceful life of co-existence. Vallalar accepted plurality of self, alongside accepting the identity between the soul and *Brahman*. However, he also maintained that the souls are fundamentally one and the same (termed as *ānmaneya orumaippādu*), and this idea is the source of his belief in non-discrimination of souls and non-injury to any form of life. He was of the firm belief that the seeming differentiation of self does not contaminate the immortal soul. According to him, the practice of *Ānmaneya Orumaippādu* involves looking at the sufferings of others, as one's own and feeling for it. In short, **He stressed on compassion (*Īvakārunyam*) towards other creatures**. He says: "*Āruyirkkellām nām anpu seyalveṇḍum*" (love every single creature) and *jīvakārunyame perinpa vīṭṭin tiravukōl* (compassion to every creature is the key to liberation).. The main features of Saint Ramalingam's exhortations are given below (this is to be taken along with his belief in one God, who is in the form of light:

1. Differential treatment to persons on the basis of their different religions should be eschewed.
2. Caste distinctions should be abolished.
3. Recognizing the right of Universal kinship of all souls; one must treat all living creatures with loving care, holding all life on par with one's own life.
4. The path of compassion, alleviating the suffering and the hunger of the "have-nots", is the one and only key to salvation.
5. **The words uttered by the one who practices this method is nothing but the *Vedas*.**¹⁴

Views of Ramalingam has been enunciated in order to show how man transforms from animal nature to that of a human, as long as he is able to empathize with the other. This leads him automatically to the next level, namely, divinity (the true nature of man). The greatest realization of these thinkers is that this new aspect is not taken to be completely new since religion etymologically means to re-connect or re-gain.

In other words, it is the forgotten aspect that is re-gained and this completes the total transformation of man. This, in turn, enables him to realize that he is also one with the other (since the other is also part of the same divinity). How does man act in such a situation? He is in the society but not of it. This can be understood from the Buddhistic

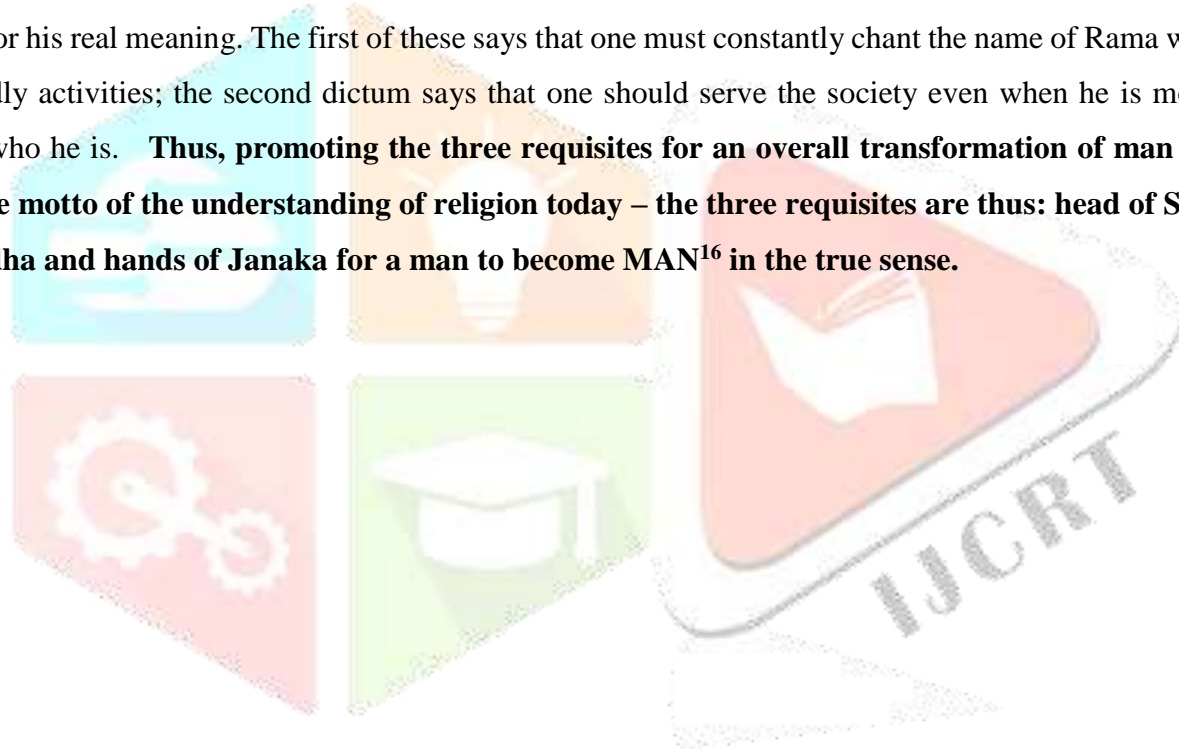
¹³ **Collected Works of Swami Vivekananda vol. VI, p. 403**

¹⁴ Saint Ramalingam's earthly existence came to an end on January 30, 1874; it was an apparently smooth merger with the Divine Being. He locked himself up in a room and forbid his people from entering it and said that even if they did so, they would find nothing. This event caused a flutter then and this caused the government to act. At last, in the month of May, the room was broken open at the behest of the authorities. They found the room empty and also found nothing suspicious. This is recorded in the Madras District Gazette published by the South Arcot District in 1906.

understanding of the *arhat*, who is expected to stay in the society and show the path to his fellow-beings. Existence in the society will in no way contaminate the *arhat*, according to the Buddha. This can be explained in the following manner: Man's actions are of two kinds – (i) action that is done under the influence of attachment, hatred and infatuation and (ii) action that is done without these. Here, the first kind of action strengthens man's desire to cling to this world while the second kind of action is not similar. This is similar to the difference that exists between the sowing of ordinary productive seeds and the sowing of a seed that has been fried and made barren. To put it in the words of Swami Vivekananda, "all development is the realization of the potential divinity, of the evolution of an amoeba into a Buddha. ... this is the transition Swamiji effected or the bridge he built in terms of the approaches he used to human development"¹⁵. Two pronouncements made in recent times by the founder-chancellor of Sri Sathya Sai University is very pertinent here:

- *Dil me Ram, Haath me kaam*
- *Hands in society and head in the forest*

In other words, these two dictums urge man of the need for being in the society and, yet, carrying forward one's search for his real meaning. The first of these says that one must constantly chant the name of Rama while indulging in worldly activities; the second dictum says that one should serve the society even when he is more inclined to realise who he is. **Thus, promoting the three requisites for an overall transformation of man should be the supreme motto of the understanding of religion today – the three requisites are thus: head of Sankara, heart of Buddha and hands of Janaka for a man to become MAN¹⁶ in the true sense.**



¹⁵ Anil Baran Ray and Sukanya Ray, "Vivekananda's model of Human Development based on Vedantic and Manliness Approaches", from *Vivekananda as the Turning Point*, p. 216

¹⁶I have taken clue from Heidegger's usage of 'being' and 'BEING' to suit my purpose.