

CHAPTER - II

THE CONCEPT OF RELIGION

(i) Introduction

In our critical survey on the relationship between man and religion, it is necessary for us to discuss the concept of religion from various standpoints. We have to clarify certain questions like whether man is a religious being, what is the origin of religion, what is religion and whether man is a religious being by nature? We must have to seek a clear picture surrounding the question – is man a religious being.

The answer needs some discussions about the constituents of the concept of man. It is needless to say that the simple definition of man is 'man is a rational animal'. "Man" is a species under the heading of the genus "animal". He has some physical hungers like any other animal. But his other part points to something which is not merely physical. He has his rational part by which he is differentiated from the other species. His half part is animality and other part is rationality, this rational constituent makes man to fly over the region of his own animality. In this domain of rationality, he has his anxiety, imagination, ambition, the feeling of reverence, the feeling of awe, the love for wisdom etc. These feelings are not due to his animal part as these can not satisfy his physical hunger. Man is then above the physical though at the same time physical too.

Being above the physical plane in his own domain of metaphysics he has his ideas, concepts, imaginations where he meets with some problems which can not be surpassed or bypassed by him. He has no escape. If we take the case of the love towards children felt by the parent, we find that parent have the life-long love for their children. They can not explain the 'why' and 'how' of this feeling. It is ingrained in their own nature. It exceeds any explanation. In the same manner man has the feeling of awe, the feeling of reverence towards something which supersedes him and he can not give any

explanation unto these feelings. But his rational part impels him to seek satisfactory explanation. He then bows down to some one who will quench his thirst for the adventure to the exploration of the domain of feeling of his own.

He wants to know – Is there any design or pattern behind the curtain of the physical world? Is there any meaning of life? This ontological disposition of man impels him to know the 'whys' and 'hows' of things and drives him to know the meaning and purpose of life and the underlying unity of this world. Metaphysics being a quest for understanding the cosmos plays an important part in the life of the reflecting person. This reflective attitude drags man unto the door of religion.

(ii) Definitions of Religions

To define religion is for the historians a recurring problem. The historians of religion concern themselves with the study of religions in its historical and cultural manifestations and not with the nature of religion itself. The result of this fact gives birth to the existence of a field of study, the object of which is ambiguous.

For this problem of the definition of religion there are three approaches to define religion. First, is the search for a common essence, second, is the search for family resemblance and third, is the offering of a persuasive definition.

In our search for the common essence of religion, we can say that religion is a belief in god but then we are confronted with the fact that many of the world religions, such as Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Hinayana Buddhism are completely atheistic. If we say that religion is a belief in the supernatural, we are confronted with the fact that many versions of Pantheism, by Spinozism, Schelling and Scheleiermacher and by some of the religions of the Orient tend to identify god with nature. So all religious men are not devotees of the Supernatural.

This search for a common essence of religion is complicated by the fact that Humanism has become a religion for some people and Communism for

others. But neither makes place for traditional religious concerns though these may provide answers to the question of the meaning of life or the meaning of history. Some can have religion out of success or wealth or golf but the common essence inhered by the great religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, is too much lacking in these types of religions. There is no distinctive mark which these religions have in common. Men find an ultimate set of values in the great religions of the world, but this applies to lesser religions as Communism, Nazism, humanism, fishing and golf. It is so, then the man who has made a religion out of wealth is the man to whom all his other interests and activities are made insignificant by his ultimate concern.

A recommended functional definition of religion is Paul Tillich's¹ assertion that religion is a state of being grasped by an ultimate concern. The strength of Tillich's definition lies in capturing a common and distinctive essence for most of the things that can commonly be labelled as religion as the Ultimacy of human concern seems to be the least common and perhaps distinctive of all religions. No doubt his definition of religion widens the scope of religion but at the same time it loses contact with fine concerns of religion and of the concreteness of religion. At the same time all religious persons are not so well-integrated to have the concern for the Ultimate. Tillich's definition is not free from the normative connotation which is intrinsic to Tillich.

Now if we go to explore the domain that is the search for the family resemblance of religion then we find that all objects which are called by the common name have not the common essence but they are related by a fabrication of overall similarities and of detailed dissimilarities. Now our concern is to find out the family traits of religion. For this we can look at a selected list of family traits and family members for the concept of religion. Family traits of Christianity, Islam and Judaism is that they believe in a supernatural intelligent being or beings. But it is absent in Vedanta, in Pantheism, in Communism and in Naturalistic Humanism. Christianity, Islam and Judaism have the common trait in believing a complicated world-view interpreting the significance of human life. This belief is the invigorating force of Vedanta, Hinduism and

Pantheism but this belief is absent in communism and in Naturalistic Humanism. Vedanta, Hinduism, Pantheism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam believe in experience after death but it is totally absent in communism and in Naturalistic Humanism.

Selected Family Traits of Some Religions

Family Traits	Christianity Islam Judaism	Vedanta Hinduism	Communism	Naturalistic Humanism
1. Belief in a Supernatural intelligent being or beings.	P	P	A	A
2. Complicated world view interpreting the significance of human life.	P	P	A	A
3. Belief in experience after death.	P	P	A	A
4. Moral code	P	P	A	A
5. Belief that the moral code is sanctioned by a superior being or beings.	P	P	A	A
6. Theodicy	P	P	A	A
7. Prayer Ritual	P	P	A	A
8. Sacred object and Places.	P	P	A	A
9. Revealed Truths	P	P	A	A
10. Religious Experiences.	P	P	A	A
11. Deep intense Concern.	P	P	A	A

From this selected family traits of some religions, it is clear that the importance of the traits which a particular religion inheres is not merely numbers of the traits but it should guide us to decide and to determine to call something as religion. This psychical exercise indicates the richness and concreteness of religion. These traits though not fully complete yet are too nearer to be the necessary conditions of religion.

No definition of religion has ever been framed which can touch its every aspect in life, as because of the amazing complexity inhered in the idea of religion. Though it lies independently in the heart yet it embraces all the aspects of life. If we want a most probable definition of religion then we have to go we want a most probable definition of religion then we have to go deep into morality as morality is an unavoidable condition of religion. So in this context, it is necessary to discuss Kant for whom morality must take the place of religion. We have in Kant, the complete reduction of religion to morality as for him, mortality alone constitutes the essence of religion and nothing else really matters. Kierkgaard ² emphasaized the point that the concept of religion is much richer than Kant would allow. He views that religion can not be reduced to mere morality a there are many dedicated men of religion who do not subordinate to the ethical values. On this point Kierkgaard found himself to be in agreement with another religious thinker of the nineteenth century that is Frederich Scheleiermacher ³ for whom "Religious essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling". He thinks that the most insane and meaningless things are done as pious acts with the most admirable things as experience teaches us so. For him, religion does not impose man to activity but it dictates man to feel and in the feeling of mystical experience the whole soul is merged in the direct and immediate feeling of the Eternal and the Infinite. But this description of one particular type of religious experience is merely persuasive as ordinary experience of religion is more richer than that.

Logical positivism with its verification principle views that religious propositions are not capable of empirical verification for which these propositions do not possess any factual meaning. But this principle of verification is not and can not be a self-evident statement as it can not stand at the alter of its

own criterion of verification by sense-experience for which it loses the same logical character of meaningfulness.

At this juncture of discussion if we recognise positivism then we find that positivism assumes to answer the major philosophical problem offering a metaphysics of Science. In materialism, we find that it attempts to explain all the facts of the universe in terms of matter and motion and for which it regards consciousness as unnecessary. But consciousness though itself is not an object yet it enables us to observe objects. The world in its totality includes the realm of facts and the realm of values. Besides knowledge we are gifted with intuitive understanding which is a total response to reality and metaphysical truth involves exercise of intuitive understanding.

Scientific metaphysicians like Bergson, Alexander and Whitehead conceived that there is an empirical root to all metaphysical reality. For Alexander,⁴ infinite universe is potent with the highest quality of Deity. Whitehead⁵ conceives religion as a transforming power which enriches the lives of the individuals.

In India, religion means 'Dharma' which is derived from the root to uphold, to sustain, to nourish. For Buddhism, man has to become a man who is in urgent need to follow the code of conduct laid down by Buddhism, Jainism by definition is a collective phenomenon which is waiting for its completion. Mahavira is the man who was able to realise the inward dignity of his own self and for him religion is a transforming experience in the life of a man. For the Sikhs, man has to obey a code of conduct by which he will realise his own self. The basic principle of Brahma Samaj is fellowship and union. For this Samaj, Vedantic message of a central unity is expected to lead mankind to the realisation of universal, Religion for which he has to undergo a fresh turn of mind in the direction of wisdom and self-control.

Humanism is unique by giving high rank to man viewing him as a part of nature who is gifted with immense potentialities. For humanism, love makes man's life meaningful. But this type of religion does not warrant absolute devotion which is the sole condition of religion. This humanist aspect shows its

face in Christianity in its teaching 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'. It is also present in Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and in all other great world religions of the world with some sort of peculiar labelling.

If we go to unearth the region that is the search for the family resemblances of Logical Positivism, Agnosticism, Naturalistic Humanism, Communism and Nothingness of atheistic Existentialism then we find that they are related by a complicated fabrication of overall similarities and of detailed dissimilarities. We know that the members of the same family resembles one another and are recognisable as the members of the same family though there may be differences among them.

Selected Family Traits of Logical Positivism, Agnosticism, Naturalistic Humanism, Communism, Nothingness of atheistic Existentialism.

Family Traits	Logical Positivism	Agnosticism	Naturalistic Humanism	Communism	Nothingness of atheistic Existentialism
1. Belief only in experience.	P	P	P	P	P
2. Belief in a complicated world view interpreting the significance of human life.	A	A	P	P	P
3. Belief in Moral code.	A	P	P	P	A
4. Belief in religious experiences.	A	A	A	A	A
5. Belief in deep and intense concern for man.	A	P	P	P	P
6. Belief in Theodicy.	A	A	A	A	A
7. Belief in Prayer Ritual.	A	A	A	A	A

The above chart shows that these isms have over all dissimilarities no doubt yet these are members of the same family as because of the similarities common to all of them is their non-belief in moral code, religious experience theodicy, Prayer and ritual. Agnosticism, Naturalistic Humanism, Communion and Nothingness of Atheistic Humanism resemble one another for their intense concern for man though Logical Positivism shifts its stand to a somewhat different position. Yet these theories inherit a common heritage that is the materialistic attitude with which these concepts revolted against medievalism which had the tendency for Supernatural explanation of the world.

(iii) Various Types of Religions

Our search for Various types of religions reveal that there are so many various types of religions in the world that for which these various types of religion should properly be catalogued.

If we concentrate upon the classifications of religions we find Nature religion which existed in the primitive men who were totally dependent upon the mercy of nature. This nature worship was polytheistic in nature. The folk religion existed in Greece, Rome, Babylon, Egypt, ancient India, ancient China and in ancient Germany. The animal cult, personalistic deities had shown their faces in Egypt. The Zoroastrians had their religion in their thinking that the ultimate goal of life was to gain victory over falsehood. The Aztecs had their religion which was conjoined with animism, nature worship, magical customs and rituals. The Mayans offered plants and animals to their gods. The Incas worshipped the Sun. The Teutons were much involved with the magical powers. Celtic religion had a highly developed demonology. The Greeks had their life-affirming religion which was polytheistic in nature. One of the extinct religions outside Europe is Sumerian which was polytheistic in its character. The Religion of Rome was utilitarian in its attitude. But the Oriental deities and the message of brotherly love of Christianity which was universalistic in its tune exerted lasting effect upon the souls of the Romans.

Among the living religions, Buddhism is enlisted as universal religion for

its unending labour for saving the soul from suffering. Jainism emphasises the divine potentiality of man. Islam affirms the supremacy of God and brotherhood of men. Nanak founded Sikh religion combining Hindu and Muslim religion. This religion gives a code of conduct by which the dignity of man will be flamed with its all glamour. In Zoroastrianism, in its present form is an explicit definition of a universal religious community which exceeds all differences of race, caste and nationality. Hellenistic religious life is vastly transformed due to the penetration of Indian and Zoroastrian ideas. For the Jews, personal sanctification is essential for man as it makes a turning of the soul which will create a new world and a new man. For Christianity, man has the promise and pledge for humanity.

Atheists, Pantheists, Polytheists Henotheists have their places in India and they live in mutual respects. Veda initiates human potentiality to know the Brahman and intuition opens the door of Reality. For the Upanishads, man is a celestial Being. The Hindu religion is enlivened in India by Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo and by Sri Vivekananda. In Ramakrishna we find that his speeches are the last words of Vedas, Vedanta and Upanishads. Sri Vivekananda propogated the Vedantic message all over the world by which the Western world was shaken and feels interest to know the philosophical message of Indian philosophy. The Hindu religion was devoid of missionary Zeal before Vivekananda and Vivekananda inspires the Indians with the missionary Zeal by establishing Ramakrishna Mission.

(iv) Origin of Religion

Fetishism, animism, totemism are always discussed in literature as quite distinct categories of ideas or theories about primeval religion. The animism and totemism are simply fragments of the earlier fetishism which is all-embracing in its nature. A fetish is believed to be inhabited by a life or soul.

For Taylor,⁶ a real fetish demands that a spirit is embodied in it. Spencer followed Taylor as for him fetishes are objects inhabited by ghosts. But Muller rejected the idea that fetishism was a religion. "In the McLellan paper of 1869-

70 totemism is simple a sub-type of fetishism" 7.

The mana theory was introduced under the title of pre-animistic religion. The sense of awe which is innate attribute of human nature, may be the source of animistic theory of the soul. Science was distinguished as knowledge at a particular stage of civilisation and the residue was superstition from which religion was discriminated and the last residue was magic. For Frazer, negative magic is taboo.

Through myth is a sacred tale so that an interconnection between myth and religion was built. But in the course of time mythologies came to be viewed as non-rational and foolish stories conveying no expression of religious beliefs. Max Muller attempted to establish Rig Veda as the basis for all modern cultures.

It has become increasingly crystal clear that there is no common entity which can be thought of as primitive religion or the original religion as the religious beliefs and practices in the societies which were not literate, was formed and expressed in accordance to their thought which was not polished in nature. So it is difficult for us to understand the true religion of the primitive peoples which was expressed in behaviour.

(v) Search for the Meaning of Religion

Now the time is ripe for the discussion of what really religion means as very few care to enquire what it precisely stands for. For the scientists, the basic why and how of things are still a long way off. Some of the scientists have been led to view this universe as the works of a cosmic Mind rather than a huge machine. Upsetting the materialistic outlook the existence of an effective creative will is sponsored by Henri Bergson. In its search for deeper truths, science has been led to a position where it is simply out of its depth. Pure reason also has made utmost effort to unearth the Ultimate Truth. Since Descartes, rationalist philosophers have attempted to prove the cosmos with their keen intellect. Yet confusion reigns in the domain of philosophy. All the while, philosophy has been vacillating between the extremes of Realism and Idealism which enriched itself with certain invaluable findings and astounding guess-works. Vedanta

declares that what is unknown and unknowable to the intellect can be realized as one's own self. The intuitive knowledge of a pure mind leads one ultimately to the realization of the self which is the Supreme spirit. This realization is superconscious realization where the Phenomenal world is no more than the passing show. The Vedanta holds that the self of all creatures is One that is no other than the Absolute. The self dwells in the heart of his own creatures. It is the task of man to tear off the world of phenomena to have the glimpse of the Absolute. Between the reason and impulse there is an almost perpetual war. Man's reason is winning step by step. The process of evolution has not come to an end. Man now has to recourse to pure intuition to have the glimpses of the Divinity. This real religion says that to attain the state of perfection, we have to cleanse our minds and this is all that religion teaches us to do and it can be said that this is essence of all religions.

(vi) Religious unity

In the modern culture there is the conflict between scientific view and the religious view. Religious view of the world imports a way of life as every religion offers a way to life. The hard core truth of religion is to lead life towards a destination. The living of a good life means living life in moral direction. But we should not be misled by the concept that religion is nothing but morality as morality is the essence of religion and religion means something more than morality.

Now if we are now concerned with the way, or with the destination of religion we shall find that religious experiences are ineffable. We can hear the whispering sound of it in the mystic experience of Buddhism, Christianity, Mohammadanism, Hinduism. In every religion there is a way or a path and there is a destination or experience to which it leads. 'I am the way, the truth and the life' is the saying of Jesus, of St. Josephs gospel. The Buddhist speaks of 'the noble eight-fold path' as the destination, the experience which is hidden is variously described as 'Nirvana', 'Salvation', 'Heaven', 'Union with Brahman' of the different religions seem to refer to different paths and different destinations.

All religious doctrines and dogmas are myths and images and none of them is literally true to pierce the veils of the mystery of the world yet these myths and allegories lead us to a way of life, a destination, an experience. Every religion gives the call that from this darkness of life there is a way out, a way into the light. It is possible for us to attain the light if we have the real hankering for it. Religion always insist on a moral life. It is a necessity. But the moral way alone will never lead to bliss or to salvation.

These feelings are ineffable. And this word 'ineffable' must be understood in its strict sense as meaning that which can not be uttered at all. The essence of religion is not morality but mysticism. In the ordinary religious man that mysticism is implicit. We can notice a few of the mystics who come from different cultures and religions but which is common to all of them is the assertion that there is an experience of the world in which all distinctions between subject and object, self and the not self are vanished and all the differences in the world become one. This voyage of the life are common in all Christians, Muslims, Pagans, Hindus, or Buddhists. The unifying vision of the religiously disciplined mind lead to love and compassion and the source of the good life because in it all differences are abolished including the difference between 'I' and 'You' which is the root of all egoism and selfishness. In this connection we have to remember Christian phrase which tells us that the peace of God, passeth all understanding. The peace of God, which is the same as the blessedness of Nirvana.

The Upanishads have been the chief source of the best Hindu thought till now. The great theme of the Upanishads is that the individual soul or self or a man is identical with Brahman. The difference which we make between ourselves and Brahman is maya or illusion and we have to discard the illusion or maya to have the glimpse of Brahman. In the supreme mystical experience, the soul passes into an immediate, experienced union with Brahman. It of this mystical experience that the Upanishads everywhere speak. This self can not be understood as its essence transcends all multiplicities in the unifying vision of the one. That the world is an illusion is the standpoint which finds expression in the Hindu doctrine of maya and in a less fully developed form in all the philosophies of Plato and Spinoza and in Bradley, who hold that the space-

time world is an appearance and is not 'true reality'. It will be observed that this view confirms to the great insight of Kant according to whom, man is an inhabitant of both worlds.

In this context we have to remind ourselves of the fact that pure reason can not unearth the ultimate reality. One of the latest guess-works declares that in the search for truth intuition can go further than intellect. Though we are on the threshold of a new era of Scientific and technological achievements yet at the same time we are lurking for the meaning of our lives. Religiously disciplined nature of man can make way for the emergence of a new world where world-solidarity can be found out where all the geographical boundaries will be immersed. Humanity engulfs all the differences of men as the moral law binds the members of the human family as one and this membership of humanity makes man to shoulder the responsibility of safety and peace of the whole mankind. The humanity is a living organization which is tightly interwoven by the human values. Man is finite no doubt but at the same time he himself is infinite being aware of his unique intrinsic significance which makes him to step in the ladder of moral law to find out the world of super-nature. The exemplary luminous life of man-god like Sri Ramakrishna, Nanak, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Sankara, Sri Chaitanya will dispel that darkness of confusion about the potential divinity of man. This divinity is attained not with pure reason. We then are now at the door of Vedantic Standpoint which cultivates intuition as the super approach to the Ultimate Reality.

(vii) Present state of Religion

Now we can give our attention to the present state of religion. We are now in one of those great periods of history when humanity is taking a leap into the future. We are now the transitional figures with widened intellectual perspective and with increasing secularization of life. The rapid dissolution of accepted values paves the path for a new orientation of human solidarity. The world-over anxiety, the note despair are preparing the path for a radical change in our views of life signifying a clearer recognition of man's inherent dignity and of the brotherhood of man.

We can deny the religious instincts on the plane of reason as because of our scientific and technological achievements. But the dread of meaninglessness makes room for inner disorder in our mental make up. Religion now comes back to shoulder the responsibility to save the utter ruins of our civilization. Reasonable faith, intellectual integrity and ethical conviction of this religion can claim loyalty of the whole of mankind.

All the living religions of the world that is Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism are revising their attitudes. These religions are now engaged in examining whether their basic tenents are relevant to the present conditions of the world.

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CHAPTER- II

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