

Second Chapter: Nature of the Universal Religion

In the previous chapter, we have tried to describe the basis of religious consciousness and its gradual process of development. In doing so, we have found that in both the stages, namely, tribal stage and national, the religious consciousness of human being does not enjoy the primary place. In these two stages, either the tribe or the nation holds the central position in which an individual human being's choice and aspiration is subject to the laws of the tribe or nation. In both these stages, religion has appeared as narrow and conservative in the perspective of people. Moreover, at these two stages, a particular religious behaviour gets restricted to the people of the concerned tribe or nation. The people of tribe or nation had to follow its way and worship the same God which is prescribed by the nation or the tribe, irrespective of their individual choice.

With the growing nature of human personality and consciousness, human beings gradually became aware of their own choice and aspiration. Consequently, they became self-conscious about their own inner quest and did not remain satisfied with the existing mode of religion. The existing mode of religion could not satisfy their growing inner quest. Moreover, the tribal or national mode of religious consciousness sometimes caused privation to the participants. The prescribed rules and regulations of the tribe or the nation somehow pressurized the individuals to follow certain cultural code and

rituals which went against their inner psych. Therefore, religion simply became an external and artificial expression to them.

Probably under such psychical and social condition, religious consciousness of the human started to look for another sort of religious phenomena within their unconscious states of mind. They were looking for a more refined and developed form of religion which could satisfy their growing mental crisis. The growing religious consciousness of human mind wanted to enjoy a state which was free from narrow boundaries of caste, sex, race etc. It seemed that such growing crisis of human psyche gave birth to the quest for a universal religion. However, it is difficult to answer that at what point in the history of human civilization, human beings have started to longing for universal religious phenomena. In other words, it can't be measured by the criteria.

However, some theological explanations concerning the origin of the ideal form of religion for mankind can be found in almost all the great religious scriptures. Here the term "ideal religion" can be understood as a form of religion which is the best form of religion for entire mankind. So in this ideal context religion can also be seen as a universal religion. The different religious scriptures of both the Eastern and Western world have tried to proclaim the ideal form of religion for mankind in their own fashion. Every scripture holds quite a similar account of view concerning the establishment of religion into this mundane world. Additionally, it does not maintain any historical evolution and development of religious idea but a supernatural origin of religion. They say that the true form of religion was handed down to

the human being by the Almighty God through His dear messenger. In other words, true religion was revealed before humanity by God's wish. According to the scriptures of prophetic religions, God had an intention to save humanity from this troublesome world and its sin. As a result, God has sent his messenger to preach the true teachings concerning the nature of life and world for their salvation, i.e. freedom from suffering. In brief, God handed down the ideal form of religion into this world.

To substantiate this point we take an example: according to Islamic theology, between 5th to 6th century C.E. a beloved messenger of God namely Muhammad appeared before the people of Mecca to preach the eternal and ideal way of life approved by the God, in other words the true eternal form of religion. Through Prophet Muhammad, the Absolute God intended to evolve the ideal form of religion, i.e. Islam, into the world. A quite similar account of view concerning the origin of a true form of religion can be found in the literature of Judaic-Christian tradition. It can also be seen that the great messengers of God like, Moses, Jesus etc. were also sent to earth by God to preach the eternal truth of religion before mankind. If we go through the scriptures of Judaic-Christian literature, then we find that around 1300 B.C. Moses, the great messenger of the Absolute God appeared before the people of Egypt (and Canaan) to preach God's message. Like Moses, there were many messengers emerged among the people of Canaan to preach the true form of religion preferred by God. On the other hand, if we look into the New Testament, we see that Jesus was sent among the people of Jerusalem in the

4th to 3rd A.D by the same Absolute God to advance the true teachings of God before the human civilization for their salvation through relief from their sin. Evidently, one can notice that many of the great religious scriptures of religious traditions believed/believes that ‘true’ form of religion has been established by the Almighty God within the human society.

Similar accounts of the universal religion (in the sense of dharma) can be found in Hindu mythology. Many of the Hindu mythological texts maintain that God Himself incarnated in various forms in this mundane world to establish the Dharma and to emancipate evil from the human society. However, the word “Dharma” is not an exact synonym of the word “religion”, although in a very loose sense they can be used interchangeably. In the next chapter, an attempt will be made to clarify it while exploring the claims of Hinduism. The conception of *Dashavarata* of Lord Vishnu is a unique and popular conception in this regard. It is believed by most of the Hindus that Lord Vishnu has incarnated (and will incarnate) into this mundane world in ten different forms (*Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki*) to protect the Dharma. In the *Matsyapurana* (250-500C.E.) we see that Lord Vishnu incarnated into this mundane world by taking the form of a fish, which was named as ‘*Matsya Avatar*’ (fish incarnation). Lord Vishnu takes the form of a ‘*Matsya*’ (fish) and incarnates to this world during the period of ‘*Mahapralaya*’ (dissolution) in order to save the life of seeds and the life of King Manu (Vaivasvata Manu the king of Dravidadesa). And in

‘*NarasimhaAvatar*’, we find that during the Satya Yuga the Lord Vishnu has incarnated in the form of half lion and half man to save his beloved follower Prahalad from his father, Hiranyakasipu. Before the *Narasimha Avatar*, in Satya Yuga the Lord Vishnu takes the form of a boar in order to save the life of both humans and gods and to restore the dharma from the hands of Hiranyakasipu’s brother Hiranyaksha who becomes reckless at that time. However, it is not only the belief of ancient Indian people but it is also the belief of a greater number of modern Indian man that God has come down to the world to establish Dharma or we can say, the true form of religion. It is a dynamic Hindu believe that whenever a human society is besmeared with sin and decay the Lord will incarnate and descend to the world, again and again, for the establishment of dharma. Verse from *Bhagavadgita* is a testimony to the expression of this beautiful Hindu thought. In the verses 7 and 8 of chapter 4 it is proclaimed that;

“*yadāyadā hi dharmasyaglānirbhavatibhārata*

Abhyutthānamadharmasyatadātmānaṁsrijāmyaham”^{xlix} (verse7)

“*Paritrāṇāyasādhoṇaṁvinsāyacaduṣkṛitām*

dharmasamsthāpanārthāyasambhavāmiyugēyuge”¹ (verse8)

A.C Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupādā translates these two verses in the following way;

“Whenever and wherever there is a decline in religious practice, O descendant of Bharata, and a predominant rise of irreligion-at that time I descend Myself.”^{li} (verse-7)

“To deliver the pious and to annihilate the miscreants as well as to re-establish the principles of religion, I myself appear millennium after millennium.”^{lii} (verse-8)

However, if we go through the religious scriptures of Semitic religions, similar kind of assumptions can be found concerning the origin of religion like that of *Bhagavadgita*. By following the research works of many scholars we have come to know that before the emergence of a new messenger of God of Semitic religions, the Semitic society was suffering from a social, political and moral decay. These great messengers of God were sent amidst the people of respective societies to lead them towards the way of God. In this regard, the opinion of Karen Armstrong is worthy to be mentioned. In her book *Muhammad*, she writes, “These paradigmatic personalities shed light on the often dark conditions in which most of us seek salvation in our flawed world. They tell us what human beings can be.”^{liii} This same notion can be discerned in the gospels of Holy *Koran*. Before the enlightenment of great messenger of God, namely Muhammad (570-632 C.E), the socio-political conditions of Mecca had gone through a massive decay. After the vision which Muhammad gained in the month of Ramadan at 610 C.E, he preached the ideal ways of God for living life before the people. By avoiding the collisions of people he tried to unite the people of his surrounding clans under the head of one

absolute God. Swami Vivekananda has beautifully expressed the intention of Muhammad in the following words, “Mohammad by his life showed that amongst Mohamadans there should be perfect equality and brotherhood. There was no question of race, creed, color and sex”^{liv}.

Similarly, if we look back into the history of ancient India (within 5th to 6th century C.E) then we find that how the people of India were constantly deprived of the basic human rights, and often misguided in the name of religion by the group of (Brahmin) people. At that time Lord Buddha (SiddhartaGoutam) has appeared just like a light of hope for those people, the concerned people found a sense of relief in Buddha’s preaching. Lord Buddha seemed to have become a banyan tree to these deprived people of India. As we see by following the scholarly works of HaraprasadShastri, within the 5th century CE greater number of mass of that time of Indian civilization became Buddhists. Lord Buddha preached some cardinal virtues of human beings like non-violence, truth, justice, averting from sexual misconduct, refraining from stealing, etc., and tried to mention its worth to the human society, which is essential at that temporal perspective. He preached the unique lesson of dharma. Likewise if we follow the other two Semitic religions such as Christianity and Judaism, we find similar conception of origin of religion. The Judaic-Christian tradition also maintained that the beloved messenger of God had appeared before the respective group of people at the time of a social crisis in order to preach them the true form of religion.

Therefore, it can be said that almost all the great religious scriptures of the world (except Buddhism) hold that the true form of religion (that is, itself) has been handed down to us by the almighty God at the time of a social and spiritual crisis of human beings. But such claims of religions are not verifiable by any empirical means. There is no possible means through which the theological explanation of religion can be established. So we may put aside the theological explanations of the origin of religion and try to look into the writings of the thinkers to have an idea about the nature and function of universal religion or (so called) ideal religion.

George Galloway in his book *Philosophy of Religion* has tried to give a brief explanation of the nature and function of universal religion. Interestingly, he found prophetic movement (i.e. roughly from 8th to 6th century B.C.) of history among the religious tradition as the first step towards the universal religious consciousness.

According to George Galloway, through the prophetic movement within the great religious traditions, the narrow bindings of religion gradually lost its strength. For him, at the national stage of religious consciousness, God is supposed to be a matter of respective nations. But due to the prophetic movement, the gods of the nation became globalised. He writes in *Philosophy of Religion*, “In moving forward to this large and enlightened creed the prophets were at the same time moving away from the limitations of National religion. The God who the ‘Lord of the whole earth’ could not be the monopoly of one nation: the worship of the God whose service was

righteousness could not be restricted to a single ritual system.”^{lv} For him, the sprites of the great prophets have liberated new ideas and interests which gave birth of a deeper view concerning the true nature of life and world.

Here, we can say that the great prophets, throughout the world, came to propagate the true meanings of the life of the respective people. They had also come to spread awareness of common origins of people from the absolute divine source. From the above-mentioned point of view, it seems that all the great prophets of the world have focused on a universal form of religion (an ideal form of religion). According to their views, humans have a common origin; therefore, humans should follow ‘the ideal way’ prescribed by the Almighty God to lead their life. That means, they have professed one uniform religion for entire mankind. If we go through the scriptures, then we will find that the prophets of all the great religious traditions have always tried to unify the human races under the shelter of one absolute divine being. For Galloway, the prophetic spirit has tried to establish a kind of close connection between the human race and God-like ‘Father and Son’ although, for him, this short connection is not completely a new sort of connection. This similar kind of intimate connection can also be found in tribal religion. According to Galloway, similar kind of connection is found to be felt by the primitive mind. At the initial stage of religious consciousness, tribal people have felt closely connected with certain kind of mystical power. But for Galloway, such kind of relation has lost sight off within the national stage of religious consciousness. For him, at the national stage and in a sense tribal

stage also, religion became mechanized through the norms and rituals of the concerned tribe or nation. It is the prophets who brought this sense of close connection again into the domain of religion to bind human beings with the divine being through a single thread. Through the hands of the world's great prophets, the idea of a personal relationship between the God and the human beings started to flourish. Unlike the tribal stage, a prophetic movement tried to establish a personal relationship between the human beings and God. According to him, the prophetic spirit gave human beings a new vision to look at the religion from a different perspective, i.e. the perspective of humanity. In this regard, Galloway in his book *Philosophy of Religion* writes,

“Man’s relation to his god is no longer a ready-made fact, but a spiritual end to be realized. This inner spirit is not the monopoly of any caste or people, and it is by the spirit man is religious. So the ancient limits are transcendent; faith is possible is possible for all and because it is so religion in higher forms in its activity and universal in its claim. Instead of religion for tribe or nation, we have a religion of humanity.”^{lvi}

Sri Ramakrishna, the famous Indian saint of the late 19th century also cultivated a form of religion where individual human beings enjoyed the central place. He maintained the personal relationship between the humans and divine being. Ideal religion in his opinion must be free from narrow boundary of caste, creed, race etc. According to him, humans have a divine

origin; they are the sons of Goddess. They need nothing special, in the true sense of the term, to approach the divine except a pure heart and mind. Besides this, he never avoids the cultural influence upon the minds of the human being, and their psychological differences. For him, each individual is different from others regarding test, the capacity of consciousness etc. Therefore, it is quite natural that people will choose different ways. So, for him, people can take the help of different methods/mediums/practices according to their capacity of consciousness to approach the absolute divinity. Apart from the ways, everything in religion refers to the same essence, in a different tradition. With the help of a beautiful analogy, he has tried to explain this fact to his disciple:

“The mother cooks different dishes to suit the stomachs of her different children. Suppose she has five children. If there is a fish to cook, she prepares various dishes from it- pilau, pickled fish, fried fish and so on- to suit their different tests and power digestion.”^{vii}

So in his view, diversity in religion is a scientific fact. The external diversity between different religions is entailing the existence of diversity between minds of the human being. So in his view, an ideal religion must give importance to the humans and not to their accompanying characteristics.

So we can see that the different scholars at different times have sought for a religion of humanity where human’s aspiration, feelings, the endeavour

would enjoy primary place without considering caste, race, creed etc. For them, the true form of religion or universal religion must be a religion of humanity. Swami Vivekananda, the renowned social reformer of India, also searches for a religion of humanity throughout his life. According to him, the existing religions such as Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and in a sense Hinduism also fails to fulfill the criterion of a universal religion which is a religion of humanity. Because all the existing religions somehow confine themselves within the narrow bindings of caste, creed, race and many others narrow prejudices, which preclude human beings to realize their own divine nature. But he never leaves the hope of a religion which should be the religion of humanity in the future world. In 1893 at the Parliament of Religions he expressed his thought in this regard: "...but if there is even to be a universal religion it must be one which will have no location in space or time."^{lviii} Like his teacher, Sri Ramakrishna, he too maintains that religion is purely a human phenomenon and it exists within the very inner essence of human's heart and mind from the very beginning of the human race.

By following the philosophy of Vedanta, he maintains that humans are nothing but manifestations of one absolute divine being. Religion is a struggle to realize the absolute identity with the divine being, by transcending the limits of human desire and passions. So for him, religion is human's inner endeavour or struggle to transcend the limitations of narrow senses and desire. Therefore, religion in the true sense of the term is purely a human phenomenon. It is a spontaneous activity of human mind to realize the

divinity of their inner essence. Thus, an ideal universal religion must give its utmost concentration towards this endeavour of the human mind. For him people can take the help of any existing religion, ideology to transcend their limits of desire and passion because all the so-called different ways lead to the same goal, i.e. the realization of one absolute divine being within him/her. With a suitable analogy, he expresses his thought at the Parliament of Religions, “It is the same light coming through glasses of different colours. And these little variations are necessary for the purpose of adaptation. But in the heart of everything the same truth reigns.”^{lix}

In his conception, the future universal religion must keep open its arms for the humans irrespective of their associate identities. Furthermore, the future universal religious consciousness needs to develop a sense of tolerance, i.e. the power to accept others views or a sense of respect for the other’s ways. Such kind of sense of acceptance and respect towards others views can be regarded as the defining characteristics of future universal religion. For him, all the existing religions such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism etc. serves the same purpose for the humanity in their true religious spirit. All the existing religious traditions try to help human beings to transcend the limits of their sensuous boundary for realizing the divinity of their soul.

Vivekananda expressed his firm conviction about the nature of universal religion to the audience of the Parliament of Religions in America in 1893. He said “It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution or

intolerance in its polity, which will recognize divinity in every man and women, and whose whole force, will be created in aiding humanity to realize its own true divine nature.”^{lx} Apart from that a truly universal religious consciousness must give utmost importance to the aspirations, endeavour, feelings, virtues, novelty and divinity of inner soul. Another important characteristic that has been mentioned by many intellectual scholars like George Galloway, Vivekananda also mentioned that a true universal religious consciousness must leave a room for future development for the progress of universal religious consciousness. He said “The religious ideals of the future must embrace all that exists in the world and in good and great, and at the same time have infinite scope of future development”^{lxi}

From the above discussion it can be said that the term “universal religion” does not mean the uniformity of thought or belief concerning religious ideas. In this context “universality” means a kind of a state of mind which does not have any narrow cultural and social bindings. It is true that different social and cultural tools like language, and group sentiments played a formative role in the development of religious consciousness, (which we have tried to discuss in the first chapter of this thesis). But the spirit of religion does not simply end within its social aspect. Religion has also an inner spiritual essence. Sometimes the role of these cultural and social tools over human psyche becomes so massive and predominant, that it suppresses the inner essence of religion. And under such absolute social and cultural influences people may often see religion only as social phenomena, matter of society

which does not have any individual preference. In doing so people only confine them within the social and cultural periphery, and may avoid the other side of religious endeavour. A true universal religious consciousness contains the essence of these two sides of religion i.e. the social and cultural aspect, and the psychical aspect of human mind. But it gives highest preference to the human beings and not to the artificial narrow social and cultural practices because religion itself is a human phenomenon where humans should enjoy the first preference. In addition, it can be said that the universal religious consciousness should not be grounded on dogmatic emotions. It can be said that emotions should be reformed by the reason. It is reason that can make universal religious consciousness free from the dogmatic influences of external world. Here freedom means the freedom to choose, freedom to approach, freedom to express etc. Here freedom does not mean freedom of doing anything. In a sense the concept of freedom is based upon the Kantian notion of universal moral principle. Kantian universal moral principle states that, “Act upon a maxim that can also hold as a universal law”^{lxii}. So in our context that can be translated as: One should hold that religious act justified which he or she is also ready to do. In this context, Kantian universal moral principle can be used to understand the limitation of freedom (a self-imposed restraint). Therefore, we may say that in the universal stage of religious consciousness, people may enjoy the freedom, to choose their own way of approaching reality (God) without any predominant external force, and also by not harming the others’ way of approach. Here, it is

important to mention that by 'universal religion' it is not intended to mean any new form of religion, which replaces all the other existing form of religion. Thereby, 'universal religion' means a state of consciousness which is mentioned in the earlier section of this paragraph. And this 'universal religious consciousness' does not require any new social or cultural institution to express its existence. People can achieve this state of consciousness by living in the existing tradition, because the spirit of universal religious consciousness is explicitly or implicitly present in all the great existing religious traditions.