

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

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We have two words to discuss – religion and spirituality. These two words stand for two distinct realities. But, they are not entirely different realities. They are inter-connected and they form one larger reality, in the setting of life. Religion is the ‘system of faith’ and spirituality is the ‘result of faith’. Both religion and spirituality are ‘oriented’ to peace, in a progressive way. Their ‘optimum attainment’ in human life is peace, as well.

1. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

1.1. Religion

Religion seems to be a very ‘dangerous’ word today! Trucks that carry fuel (petrol and diesel) bear on its tank a caption ‘highly inflammable!’ The description is symbolic of the nature of the content. ‘Religion’ has become ‘highly inflammable’ today! Again, there is a plant that is characteristically called ‘touch me not’. It reacts instantly out of its over-protective nature. Religion has become an ‘over-reactive’, ‘over-sensitive’ and delicate matter today! Electric transformers have before it a warning ‘danger’, as well. I think, religion also badly requires this ‘danger’ warning today! Therefore, it appears that one has to be ready to risk one’s own life in order to speak on ‘religion’! But, as a matter of fact, does this ‘highly inflammable’, ‘over-reactive’ and ‘oversensitive’ phenomenon has anything to do with what religion really is and has to be? I do not think so.

1.2. Spirituality

Spirituality seems to be a highly ‘misused’ word today! Since it is not tangible or visible, it cannot be defined. Therefore, various confused notions prevail. It means different things to different people. Most people do not understand what the stuff it is. Some understand it as one and the same with religion and indulge themselves in all sorts of outdated stories, superstitions, rituals, doctrines, stipulations and other statutory practices. Some look at it as a mystical ecstasy and get even emotionally carried away by it, even to the point of being neurotic. For some, it is merely a type of magic or a heap of miraculous happenings. Some others consider it a phenomenon or an experience that defeat all sorts of rational descriptions. Some are even frightened by it and keep a distance from it, too. Some realistic people pursue it with enthusiasm, but find it a hard nut and throw it out to the dust bin. Some indeed live it in some way or other without knowing what it is. At the end of the day, what spirituality really is remains a matter that needs to be explored further.

2. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY – A COMPARATIVE GLANCE

2.1. Like ‘Body’ and ‘Spirit’

Religion and spirituality could be compared to ‘body’ and ‘spirit’, respectively and therefore they are like ‘two sides of the same coin’.

2.2. The ‘How’ and the ‘Why’ of Life

Religion explains the ‘how’ of life. Spirituality explains the ‘why’ of life. Religion stands for the ‘means’ of one’s life journey. Spirituality stands for the ‘journey’ of life itself.

2.3. 'External' and 'Internal' Forums

Religion refers to the external forum. Its machinery is visible. Spirituality refers to the internal forum. Its mechanism can not be seen. Religion is ritual expression. Spirituality is personal faith or experience. Religion is something one says or does. Spirituality is something one feels or is aware of.

2.4. 'Social' and 'Personal' Aspects

Religion is structured and socially bound. Spirituality is private and personal. Religion is a display of performances. Spirituality is the hidden dynamics of inner musings.

2.5. Human-Made and Inborn Components of Life

Religion is human-made. Spirituality is inborn. Religion is the regulatory system of human life. Spirituality is the orientation of human life. Religion is a collection of actions with attributed meanings. Spirituality is an instinctive upsurge of the dynamism of life.

2.6. Infantile and Mature Ways

Religion is often an infantile approach to God. Spirituality is fairly a mature attitude of relations with God. Religionists play with symbols and rituals, as children play with dolls. Spiritualists are in an ever-evolving process of being enlightened and elevated in life.

2.7. Complementary Ingredients

Religion and Spirituality are complementary to each other, though in extreme cases there may be contradictions between them. One is incomplete and loses its meaning without the other. Religion without spirituality is an empty ritual. Spirituality without religion is an idle thought.

3. RELIGION – SOME NEGATIVES

3.1. Uncritical habits

Karl Mark describes religion as 'opium of the people'. Much of religion is a 'bhedchaal' or a sheep-like following and a 'bheedchaal' or a crowd-like following, especially in India. Religion contains a large heap of irrational superstitions, to which a large majority of people respond with blind faith. The religious system makes people victims of archaic stories, rituals, doctrines and beliefs. They fall into the clutches of self-proclaimed 'mini-gods' who make people pray to a personality cult. By flowing along the current unreflectively they get enslaved to the system and get conditioned, like rabbits. The belief in fatalism reduces them into the predicament of a 'bird in the cage' or a 'dog in the kennel' or a 'frog in the well'.

3.2. Pathological mindsets

The ghetto-minded aspect of religion takes people away from enlightened ways and becomes self-defeating, like a curse. People get stagnated with outdated understandings. They tend to think exclusive and consider their own ways absolutely correct and others' ways wrong. This would mean 'I am OK; you are not OK', in the language of the renowned psychologist Sigmund Freud. The mania to preserve their ways makes them highly conservative and orthodox. 'Fundamentalist' attitudes make them slip into becoming 'fanatics' as regards faith matters. They land up as 'extremists' and 'separatists'. No wonder, 'communal' tendencies grow and proceed

to ‘terrorist’ attacks on others. Such mindsets in the religious sector are clearly pathological and detrimental to the human society as well as to religion itself.

3.3. Disproportionate ingredients

Firstly, though religion is intended to unite, experience proves that it divides more and unites only in a limited context. World history has it that religion has caused the highest number of wars and deaths; it has been responsible for the worst of the violence, tension, hatred, self-seeking and slavery in the world. Religion has been the most manipulated for political and economic motives; money and power corrupted religion beyond all proportions. Secondly, there is more theory and less practice of religion. Those who preach often do it for others and conveniently forget to apply the same to their own lives. There is an excessive drive for saving the souls of others, while one’s own soul is in shatters! Thirdly, although to organize is inherent in the social character of the humans, religionists fail to realize the fact that ‘too much organization and institutionalization kill the spirit’, which, in quality, is spontaneous and innovative. Fourthly, in the over all picture, more emotion, and less reason, is running the religious sector, though in some respects, truth lies on the other side. Lack of coordination between heart and head has contributed to irrational and unenlightened ways.

3.4. Isolated notion

Religion seems to be understood as cut off from the general context of the human society. Human life has immense dimensions, like ethnic, linguistic, ideological, social, cultural, regional, national and universal, as well as religious. They should not be separated from each other. Those dimensions make sense only when they are comprehended together, like the colours of a ‘rainbow’. Religion is part of the human culture. When it is separated or exaggerated as an entity by itself, it loses its meaning and therefore aberrations are sure to follow. Religious identity is only one of the facets of human identity and so, a larger consciousness of the human identity, which is necessarily multi-faceted, only can help a way out of the obsession of religious identity that causes frictions. Besides, the mania for perpetuating the traditions, as they are, is out of place, too. The streams that do not reach the ocean do not lose the meaning of their existence. Every unit has a role to play in the drama of life and a mite to contribute to the making of life. It does it in its own particular or given context. Over-preoccupation with the religious sector and its perpetuation is a fixation as well as an aberration in life.

3.5. Disoriented leadership

Religious leadership has much to do with the making of religion. Religion and their tenets are not created by God. They are the product of human minds. There is no underrating the truth that several divinely motivated seers and saints of the world, through their great mystic experiences and insights, have pioneered diverse channels of spiritual pursuit. But, most of the so called religious leaders today consider themselves to be ‘anointed to rule over the people’. Most of them emerge as leaders with foul motives or are promoted through servile routes and do not possess qualities of a leader as well as the essential spiritual experience. Most of them are ‘illiterate’ and lack the ‘moral and spiritual fibre’ that is required for a religious head. Since they do not have a clear vision or spiritual insight, they foster stereotypes and tend to entertain a VIP complex. They protect their private interests with false claims of ‘infallibility’, supported by ‘superlative titles, clownish attire and highhanded ways’. Unfortunately, the general public who are affiliated to this system of religion does not seem to have any way of being really liberated from their clutches. Only a small minority of leaders seem to make a difference as real ‘spiritual leaders’.

4. RELIGION – SOME POSITIVES

4.1. Socially oriented meanings

The English word religion derives from the Latin root 'religare' that means 'to bind or connect again' or 'to tie fast'. 'To get related' is the central meaning of this word. There are three directions towards which one has to initiate relations -- the divine, the human and the natural. Establishing a three-dimensional relationship is the sum and substance of human life. Life is a network of relationship in which all aspects are mutually connected or bound together. The Sanskrit word for religion is 'dharma', which means 'dhaaran karnaa' that in turn means 'to receive, to own, to feel bound and to feel responsible for'. It has meanings like 'duty, nature and conscience'. To 'feel, bound by one's conscience, as a sacred duty, responsible for one's life, that of others and of the entire creation' is the 'right way of living' as social beings. Both the above words affirm and uphold the 'mutually bound social system of life' as the core of human life. 'Faith' is a synonym for 'religion and dharma' in some of their dimensions. Mostly, faith directly indicates the inner reality of both these words.

4.2. Purposeful engagement

Religious engagements are oriented to a purpose. It is a complex system of ideas, stories, myths, symbols, doctrines, beliefs, practices and experiences that is directed towards 'good behaviour'. Sri Narayan Guru of Kerala exclaims, 'majhab ho koi bhee, insaan bhalaa so bhalaa'. Belonging to this religion or that religion is not the question, 'being a good human being' is meritorious. To be religious is to keep ascending the above rungs of the ladder of religion in order to reach the peak of 'being humane'. Religion is the motivating factor. It has to be the source of inspiration and strength to live one's life the right way and do the right things. The way one thinks, speaks and behaves decides the type of religion one lives. The sum and substance of one's perspectives, experiences, attitudes and approaches determine the quality of one's life as well as of faith. Religion is not the centre of life, but life is the centre of religion. That is why Jesus says 'Sabbath is for the human being' (Mk 2.27). Religion has to be at the service of the human being. Therefore, living or dying for one's religion or faith is disorientation or madness. Life is God's gift and religious engagement has to be 'life-centred' and not vice versa.

4.3. Mission of harmony and peace

'Religion has to be what God intended it to be, a source of goodness, harmony and peace', observes Pope John Paul II. Whatever that promotes goodness, harmony and peace is religion and whatever that blocks or does not accelerate them is irreligion. This statement defines the right orientation and function of religion. Living religion this way is the right way of being related to God and to the human society. That is why Jesus declares, 'blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God' (Mt 5.6). Religion has to be the abode of 'divine qualities' that build up the family of God. To achieve such a grasp of religion, one has to be qualitative in one's approach. A line from the great mystical poet Kabir fits well here, 'saar saar ko gahi rehein, thothaa dey udaai', i.e., 'hold on to the essentials and have the guts to throw away the non-essentials. These ideas amount to conclude that the inherent mission of religion is 'fostering harmony and peace'.

4.4. Journeying towards broader horizons

Religion can be said to be alive when it is future-oriented. Religious leaders, unfortunately so, tend to think that they have understood God completely and assert their absolute claim over it.

They entertain themselves with foolproof theories of God, which are totally products of the past. They are buried in the past and hardly live in the present. Their traditionalist approach is past-centred and is a sign of stagnation and death. The great theologian and thinker Kenneth Leech observes 'God is always beyond'. Only those who are ready to journey towards the future can have a reasonable claim of knowing God, at least to some extent. Ever-travelling towards innovative ways, new approaches, new interpretations and newer insights only have a future that is worth the name. The joy is in the journey and being in the process and not in reaching the destination. Breaking new grounds and setting out into new ways of thinking take one to new attainments and higher altitudes. That is why Henry Miller says, 'one's destination is never a place, rather a new way of looking at things'. Every departure is a 'death to older perceptions' and every arrival is a 'new birth into a new world'. Life is a continuous process of dying and being born again. Religion has to be a facilitator of this process, in order to be worth the name.

4.5. Inclusive thinking

The patriarchal theories of religion are exclusive. They are one-sided perceptions. Religious understanding has to be inclusive of the female gender, as well. The gender-balanced understanding of religion will ensure religion with more realism and quality. Only then religious engagements will make sense to the humans of the 21st century, especially to the women folk who involve actively in social life. Besides, the leader-centred approach to religion also is outdated. Education has become student-centred, too. Until 99 plus per cent of the large majority of the followers of religions have a major say in the making of religion, religion will not become what it is intended to be. The exclusive ways of the so called leaders have necessarily to give way to the people. Coordination and balance between the leaders and the followers, dialogue between the senior and the junior generation and harmony of the male-female components only will usher in the 'humane culture of being inclusive, dialogical, interactive, participatory and collaborative'. 'Harmony of the opposites', as in the Shinto thinking, between theists and non-theists, religious and secular, conservatives and liberals, etc. will certainly inaugurate a brighter future for the human civilization. Religion has to become a driving force of that 'spiritual culture'.

5. SPIRITUALITY -- ITS IMPLICATIONS

5.1. The Understanding of 'Spirituality'

Spirituality concerns itself with matters pertaining to the 'Spirit'. It would mean 'being guided by the promptings of the Spirit'. It refers to the orientation of human life towards the transcendent reality, i.e., some power that lies beyond. It exposes the 'ascending and evolving character' of human life. Spiritual matters indicate the ultimate meaning of life as humans. It is all about 'getting related to' that which is perceived to be beyond the bodily senses, time and the material world. Spirituality would mean being in a dynamic and ever-growing process of life. It is the way one perceives life. It is revealed by the attitude to life one appropriates. It serves as the foundation for one's life-commitments. One's vision and mission in life are grounded in one's spiritual tuning. Spirituality is the sap of life. It is the energy of life. It is the strength in life. It is the source of power in life. It is the 'raison d'être' of human life.

5.2. Theistic and Non-theistic foundations of spirituality

Spirituality has reference to the supernatural power. Believing in an external god or gods is secondary to spirituality. It goes beyond the limits of all theistic-atheistic considerations and denominational affiliations. Theistic standpoint, in its turn, could have monotheistic, tri-theistic,

polytheistic, pantheistic and other positions, too. Spirituality includes all individuals and communities of the human society, irrespective of ideologies and other social leanings. The perspectives and experiences of the practitioner of religion and dharma are geared towards attaining 'spiritual quality' in life. Spirituality cannot be identified with any particular religious tradition. Various spiritualities do not exist. The different religious traditions cannot claim to have independent spiritualities. Only certain dimensions of spirituality exist in the diverse religious traditions and worldviews. Spirituality, in the real sense of the word, is only 'one' and that is, in fact, beyond the reach of all individual perspectives and traditions of faith. It is inclusive of non-religious ideologies and perceptions of life, as well. One has to rise above the boundaries of one's religious beliefs, cultural affiliations, ethnic belongings and ideological leanings in order to have a 'holistic glance' at life and to start a journey towards ever-higher 'spiritual sensibilities'.

5.3. Vertical Spirituality

Vertical spirituality would mean 'getting related to the divine or the higher power'. The large human society of diversity has many understandings of that reality. There are dualistic and non-dualistic perceptions. There are relational and non-relational approaches. Relational categories of God also are different in various traditions. 'Father', 'mother', 'husband', 'wife', 'son', 'daughter', 'brother', 'sister', 'child', 'friend', 'guru/master', 'disciple', 'neighbour', 'stranger', 'servant', 'poor', 'the sick', 'the suffering', and the like, are categories projected on the divine. There are also gender-related and non-gender categories of God. God can be 'male', 'female', 'male-female composite', and 'neither male nor female'. These 'pluralistic ways' of conceiving the divine define the genius of the diverse religious and social cultures. But, all of them are equally valid ways of reaching out to the higher power. They are not contradictory to each other. They are 'mutually inclusive' and 'complementary' to each other. Together they attempt to draw the picture of the divine, which is much larger and even beyond comprehension. But, the relational category of 'Father' stands in extreme clarity with regard to the role of the 'Creator' or 'Life-giver' that is fundamental to the divine character and has universal implications. It is like a large umbrella under which the entire creation can gather. Therefore, a 'filial disposition towards the divine' seems to be inherent to the created nature of the humans from that angle. Of course, the theistic overtones here have to be admitted.

5.4. Spirituality as Self-realization

The Upanishads declare in a categorical manner 'Aham Brahmaasmi', which means 'I am Brahman'. When one gets relieved of 'maayaa' (ignorance) one realizes that stage. The Bible (OT, Gen.1.27) unconditionally states 'human being (man and woman) is created in the image and likeness of God'. Paul (The Bible, NT, I Cor. 3.16) asks 'don't You know that you yourselves are God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in You?' The great mystic Kabir exclaims, 'jit dekhoon, tit toon', i.e., 'wherever I look, Oh! God, You are there'. All these citations prove the presence of the divine in human beings in a special manner. It is one's religion or faith that assists one to recognize the image of the Creator in all living beings, especially in human beings. One's religion or faith is the foundation for such realization. Such 'consciousness' is indeed 'self-realization', which is spirituality in lofty heights.

5.5. Horizontal or Social Spirituality

A fraternal way of approaching other human beings appears to be the most natural attitude that befits the humans. It logically proceeds from the basic filial experience with regard to the divine Creator or Father. Considering the other one's brother or sister in a universal manner is the

‘spiritual way of being human’. ‘Loving the enemy’, as if he or she is a friend, is a revolutionary thought from Jesus. It surpasses all boundaries and extends to a perfection that is purely a divine privilege. ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’, ‘love one another’, ‘do to the other what you have him or her do to yourself’, ‘whatever you have done to other human beings you have done to God’, etc are certain unique teachings of Jesus that characterize the radical values of social commitment that is equal to a sure spiritual pursuit. A ‘preferential concern for the oppressed and the marginalized’ would be the culmination of the horizontal spirituality of the humans. The relationship with the divine is proved beyond doubt in the relationship with other human beings, especially the lowliest of the world. Such a fraternal and social style of life suggests unlimited universal implications and spiritual possibilities that are common to the entire humanity. This is the ‘spirituality of social commitment’. ‘Making a better society’ is its ultimate objective. A larger outlook is necessary for the same. It requires a larger heart, too. It needs a ‘harmony perspective of life’ as well as a ‘dialogical attitude’. It calls for celebrating the diversities of life as ‘one body, though many in parts’. It requires focussing on the universal values of life as a shared cultural and spiritual heritage of the human society. It is commitment to ‘making a more harmonious society’. This is social spirituality, par excellence!

6. HUMAN SPIRITUALITY

6.1. Natural spirituality

Natural spirituality is a ‘here and now’ kind of spirituality. It would mean being aware of the surroundings of one’s life and interiorizing whatever happens consciously. It relies very much on the natural qualities or values of life as well as daily happenings. It includes all the natural experiences of life -- a sense of meaning in life, a sense of the spiritual, a sense of mystery in life, a sense of wonder in life, an appreciation for life, an acceptance of life, a humble search for the deeper and broader implications of life, a reflective attitude in life, a devotion to excellence or quality in life, a sense of value in life, an adherence to the higher principles of life, a sense of perfection in life, a sense of wellness in life, a spirit of being related to the other, a commitment to the welfare of the other, etc. all the commonplace instances, when consciously owned and enjoyed, without effort become fine spiritual treasures of human life. These human niceties elevate one to spiritual heights, par excellence.

6.2. The spontaneous dimension of life

Spirit is like ‘breeze’. One doesn’t know where it comes from and where it goes to. One cannot hold or block it. One cannot change its direction. It is beyond the grasp of anyone. But it affects everyone. It benefits everyone. It brings a sense of coolness to every one. It refreshes everyone. It gives a new life to everyone. It is spontaneous and natural. It inspires the one who is in it. It motivates one to live, to be good and to do well. It purifies one of one’s negative feelings. It inspires poem and music. It awakens one’s creativity. It offers a touch mystical touch. To experience and to respond positively to the Spirit that comes across to one’s life in a gentle way is a spontaneous fashion of being spiritual.

6.3. Spirituality would mean being ‘transpersonal’.

‘Being transpersonal’ can be a great spiritual way, though from an agnostic outlook. It would mean ‘going beyond the ego’. In other words, it is ‘rising beyond I, me and self’, which is perhaps the most difficult thing in life. It is about setting on an ever-evolving journey of ‘breaking the barriers’. It is rising above the ego-based leadership that is driven by power, recognition and reward. Thinking in terms of the interests of others, or stakeholders in business

firms, beyond the level of profit motive is a way of being 'transpersonal'. It is an attitude that is promoted by the 'nishkaam karma' (doing one's duty, without being glued to the result of the same) advocated by Bhagvat Gita. 'Rising above oneself', or being transpersonal, is humble take off in life that assures an arrival at high spiritual altitudes.

6.4. Spirituality is a higher level of 'consciousness'.

Human life lies just in 'being conscious' of it. Consciousness is based on 'being aware of the larger setting of things'. It means 'being aware of the larger dimensions and implications of the cosmic reality'. It would mean 'being committed to the larger good of the reality'. 'Consciousness' is rooted in 'conscience'. Human conscience requires a 'personal conscience', which beyond question is 'grounded in values'. It means being humble, being trustworthy, being integrated, being honest, etc. It would mean being liberal and all-inclusive in attitude. It means being universal in outlook. It means being other-oriented, being committed to the other, being committed to the family, being committed to the community, being committed to the nation, being committed to the society, being committed to the entire creation, etc. Consciousness means being 'catholic' in spirit, being universal and being cosmic in a mood of mystical elation. The larger and the higher facets of consciousness determine the quality of being spiritual.

6.5. Spirituality is a sense of 'bliss'.

Spirituality is a sense of bliss in life. It lies in simple things. It is a simple style of relishing every act in life. It would mean consciously making the best of every moment in life. It is the joy of living; it is the joy of loving; it is the joy of giving; it is the joy of listening; it is the joy of speaking; it is the joy of doing; it is the joy of serving; it is the joy in suffering; it is the joy of being appreciated; it is the joy of being accepted; it is the joy of sharing; it is the joy of enjoying; it is the joy of experiencing; it is the joy of understanding; it is the joy of forgiving; the joy of being grateful; it is the joy of travelling; it is the joy of achieving; it is the joy of winning; it is the joy of failing; it is the joy of losing; it is the joy of attaining; it is the joy of giving way to the other; it is the joy of sharing in the life of the other; it is the joy of celebrating the other; it is the joy of seeing the other have more; it is the joy of seeing the other better; it is the joy of seeing the other ahead; etc. It is all-embracing of life, as if 'gaagar mein saagar'! Spirituality is nothing but a blissful life.

6.6. Spirituality is a celebration of peace.

Spirituality is the closest to peace. It is door to the house of peace. Peace is not a state where there is 'absence of war' or tension-free life. It is not a deadly stillness, like that of the cemetery. It does not require suppressing all thoughts, feelings and aspirations, too. Refraining from all action and being passive is not peace, either. Peace is an active reality and it calls for full presence. It necessarily involves interaction, give and take, sharing and celebration. Spiritual pursuit is open-ended and is inclusive of all religious traditions, social ideologies and cultural streams. Peace is the 'culmination' of all spiritual attainments, self-realization or God-realization. Peace is the 'final objective' of life that governs the entire course of the journey. Peace is the 'taste-maker' of life, without which life loses its meaning. Peace stands for the 'grand finale' of the human journey of refinement and enlightenment as well as the niceties and delicacies of life. Peace is the gift of the Spirit. It is enjoyed by those of 'clean conscience'! Spirituality is an eternal celebration of peace!

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