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Religion in the 21st Century

Religion in recent times has been attacked for many of the ills affecting mankind; wars, riots, terrorism, forcible conversion, economic exploitation, sexual crimes etc. have been attributed to the religion directly or indirectly. This is however not true. Religion primarily prompts us to learn the spiritual teachings and apply these to our everyday life to make our lives more pure and virtuous. These spiritual teachings are very similar in all religions; there is unity and homogeneity of all the religions of the world. The spiritual teachings of love, sacrifice, non-violence, humility, forgiveness, compassion, tolerance, service, sympathy, empathy etc. have been propagated by all the religions in one form or another. Without these spiritual teachings, we would

be like the lower animals; there would be no progress and no civilization. The sages and seers have taught us through ages to put these spiritual teachings into our daily secular and material acts to make them more spiritual and holy. Instead we human beings often put the material and political considerations into the religion to make it more corrupt and unworthy! This is why religion gets a bad name and we even become wary of it.

The spiritual acts of love, sacrifice etc. only bring us greater joy and fulfillment. In practice, we have often noticed that when we are angry and violent, we ourselves become unhappy and disturbed within. God has made the human mind so cognitive that when we do wrong unrighteous deeds, we suffer the

consequences almost instantly. Conversely when we do righteous and pure deeds, we become joyful. Religion teaches that we reap what we sow; this is the divine law.

Hindu philosophy explains that the human mind develops in four stages:

- *Manas*-Basic instinctive mind, which works by natural instincts. Self protection, procreation etc. are examples of this first stage of the mind.
- *Buddhi*-Intellect, which works by higher analytic reason and brainpower. This mind is more developed in human beings than in the lower animals.

After developing the intellect, the human mind gets two opposing options to develop:

- *Abimkar*-Ego. The 'ego' mind tends to be self-centered, selfish and harmful.
- *Chitta*-Spiritual. The spiritual mind is directed toward the 'Divine'; it tends to become loving, serving, sacrificing etc.

All our secular and sensual acts are guided by the intellect:

However if we become 'egoistic', we may cause harm not only to others, but eventually even to ourselves. Just as a greedy person may consume more food, caring little about the needs of others, and ultimately become sick and hurt himself too. This is true for all other egoistic activities also. Occasionally the egoistic person may indeed become more dangerous and treacherous, for others as well as for himself, than even the most ferocious animals.

With spiritual thinking, a person acts keeping the thought of God always in his mind and regards all beings as children of God. He acts with compassion, tolerance and service toward others. He remains peaceful and contented. In the end, he gets more respect, love and admiration from others and is very amply rewarded.

The scriptures mention, "Often the egoistic and selfish acts are sweet in the beginning but become

poison in the end." The egoistic and sensual acts may ultimately bring more shame and humiliation to a person and his family. The spiritual acts on the other hand bring bliss and glory. Human beings are more mental creatures than physical; we get more affected by our inner feelings than by sensual considerations. If someone speaks harshly, we may feel the pain and sorrow more than if we are beaten bodily!

God has endowed human beings with a superior mind to use the 'free will' to choose between the ego and the spiritual. Religious masters prompt mankind to walk on the spiritual path and discard the ego path. Meditation on God and the Divine virtue helps man to tread on this path of spirituality and shun the path of ego. Walking on the spiritual path does not mean neglecting one's own body and personal needs of the dear and near ones. Rather taking proper care of one's body and looking after the family may be also regarded as the spiritual acts of fulfilling the divine duty allotted to us as long as we do so without causing any harm to others or unduly exploiting them. The spiritual person eventually finds the treasure of inner joy, irrespective of outward conditions. Such a person is beyond pain and sorrow of the physical and mental worlds. He or she sees God in all beings, and is blessed with eternal joy. A truly spiritual or religious person may become peaceful and content even as he faces death; spirituality makes him detached from sensual and material things, making spiritual feelings more important than material things. The virtuous higher consciousness becomes the anchor of his life and he remains blissful even when all his corporeal assets are withdrawn.

Science undoubtedly plays a vital role in our lives. The human mind steers secular activities towards many achievements. Religion, however, steers the human mind towards spiritual virtues. Albert Einstein described the synergy between science and religion: "Science without religion is lame, and religion without science is blind." A man of science

who does not have the purity and ethical morality of religion is not likely to contribute significantly to the well being of mankind, even if he becomes highly successful in his field. A man of religion who is negligent of science would be, for most part, impractical and handicapped.

People have repeatedly revolted against religion, protesting against the evil acts committed in its name. Some have tried to disassociate from religion, but many have returned to the path in one form or another. The most powerful persons in the world have finally bowed down and kneeled to beg for mercy when they are faced with utmost adversity. Scientists and artists of the highest caliber have acknowledged the infinite power of God, and prayed with sincerity and devotion. Countries like Russia, who challenged God and chose only the secular path, have ultimately admitted their folly. Our Sindhi community is essentially anchored to God and religion from the earliest times. Our dear Dada Jashan Vaswani has repeatedly prompted us with his golden advice, "Always remember to keep your appointment with God; all other things can wait, but not God!" God is truly our greatest security. We simply cannot do without God.

Even as we are severely stressed with the present situation of our world today, we may accept it in all humility as the will of God. Sages have repeatedly proclaimed that nothing ever happens without a divine plan and purpose. The past century, filled with two horrific world wars and many other atrocities also brought forth unimaginable gains. The color bar was removed, imperialism was abandoned, women got their rightful place in society, dictators like Hitler and Stalin were discredited, and nonviolence became a successful strategy to effect political change. There were also many scientific achievements: landing on the moon, air travel, computers, and medical miracles amongst so many others. We may therefore have faith that the present century too will bring forth many new divine bounties despite the chaos and confusion that we see

around us.

Inter-faith groups are taking firm root in many places. The talk of one religion being superior to other religions is gradually fading. As all races of the world are considered to be equal, so too are the various religions. The world at large is coming to terms with religious pluralism. As no two individuals are the same, so too there are differences amongst the religions of the world. There are some, especially amongst the youth, who respect and have interest in learning from other faiths. This positive development may ultimately transform the religious evolution of the world at large.

God is one without a second; we simply cannot conceive of more than one God in the modern world. All beings therefore are members of one divine family. Enmity has no place in this family. As our physical body is made of billions of cells, so too is the cosmic family made up of so many beings. We are slowly beginning to understand that if any one part is affected, it will ultimately have repercussions on the whole.

Destroying anyone, however wrong and unpleasant he may be, is not an option. When a tissue or organ in the body becomes sick, it needs our careful attention. A physician is expected to take utmost care to heal the patient. Love, compassion, service, and unlimited goodwill towards the sick are the characteristics of a good physician. Nonviolence and peaceful harmony are hallmark of any worthy family. It should always be possible to practice nonviolence in our thoughts and words, even though it may not be practical to avoid violence altogether. If violence is resorted to as an unavoidable last choice, it may yet be done with utmost compassion and love. Hatred and bigotry must always be avoided.

The world is moving at a faster pace than we can imagine. The Internet and the TV media have opened many new vistas of knowledge. The monopoly of understanding religion, spirituality, and God by few chosen ones may soon be a thing of the past. In this era of computers and other technological gadgets the

world is becoming more open and transparent; secrecy and privacy may no longer be possible. A middleman between the individual and the Divine has often become more of a hurdle than an asset; full of many corrupt and shady practices. Undoubtedly there are many genuine and worthy preachers and gurus; however it is not easy and practical to have direct one-to-one access to these exalted spiritual persons. Perhaps for these reasons, total loyalty to only one person or sect has become difficult and intricate. Faith, but not blind faith, has become the slogan of the present times. Freedom of choice in religion has become a new possibility.

How Religion Is Evolving

Many previous concepts of religion and spirituality are changing by the day. New explanations and interpretations of old scriptures are presented and explored. Religion is no longer a closed book. Learning from a new source, man or media, knows no bar; not learning from other sources is becoming a matter of shame. Lengthy rituals without understanding the meaning and purpose are becoming extinct.

In every religion, there is also the manifestation of the supernatural powers. Charles Robert Richet, who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1913, wrote "Metaphysics is not officially a science or recognized as such. But it is going to be. Our five senses are not our only means of knowledge." The concept of transcendence, of banishing the constraints of time and space, is becoming vindicated. Mankind in the future would perhaps recognize the infinite mystic divine force, but would opt to consider it outside the dominion of the special few.

Often in the past, humanity has boasted of conquering and exploiting nature. However, recurring natural disasters and other phenomena expose our limitations and vulnerabilities. Perhaps, the more we know, the more we will become aware of our vast ignorance!

Different religions portray different pictures of the

Divine and the cosmos; these descriptions are like those of the proverbial seven blind men describing an elephant. Each one is right in his own restricted way, but only partly. None may ever fathom the infinite nature of the divine and its cosmos. Soon we may realize our humble place, and learn to surrender in harmony. In the divine scheme, humanity is not separate from nature; we are linked by physical as well as spiritual bonds with the elements around us. We may ultimately hold a deep reverence for life and an awareness that the great forces of nature—the earth, the water, the fire, the air and space—as well as all the various orders of life, including plants and trees, forests and animals, are bound to each other within the infinite divine cosmos.

Religion—*dharma*—is basically like a classroom, a school, or a university, where we get instructions for the moral and virtuous pedagogy. Ultimately, however, it becomes our responsibility to learn and understand these spiritual teachings properly and put them to everyday use. Even more than that, we must imbibe dharma deep into our mindset (*antah-karan*), so that we think in a moral and spiritual manner, harboring no hatred, ill will, or harm to others. Is it easy? No, it probably is not easy, but the rewards are incredible and magnificent. In a world where we are always searching for a moment of peace and joy, a question was put to Reverend Pramukh Swami Maharaj, head of the Swaminarayan sect, the living saint of the highest stature in our own time: "You have a master key; as a result, you are always happy and at peace, no matter what difficulties you face. What is the secret?"

He replied, "Sarvamangal—one who is always happy—has the master key! It is to obey the command of God at all times, to be tolerant, humble, and to serve everyone."

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