

The Role of Religion in World Peace

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The word 'peace' may be understood in two ways. One is on the individual level, and the other is on the collective level. We seek peace for ourselves both individually and collectively. I cannot imagine a single person anywhere who does not want peace. But at the same time, I have yet to see people who are able to follow the conditions for attaining it. It does not come all of a sudden; and it does not come unless we play our part properly, both individually and collectively.

People like to think that the past was all golden. But if we go through the annals of history we see that the world has rarely enjoyed peace. There has always been discord, dissension, wars, and one group trying to exterminate another. People think that if they are stronger than they are now, perhaps they will have peace, because then hostile people won't have the courage to attack them. This leads to a sort of peace. When a powerful nation has so much strength that it can dominate others, we think that it is peaceful. But this creates discontent, a psychosis of fear, in other nations. That is the condition that we are facing. It is not merely a product of our modern age; it has been the trend for every era that we can think of.

In Vedic times we find that there were two groups, the Devas and the Asuras, always fighting with each other. And then we gradually study the pages of history.

History is mostly the records of events like wars. In modern times there have already been two world wars, and we are now anticipating a third one! This is the condition that we are living in.

We see that accumulation of power does not bring about peace. There may be just a temporary truce. Take, for instance, the case of the First World War. The warring powers were supposed to be developed nations, but they fought among themselves to dominate one another. The result was that a conflict that began on a small scale eventually involved many countries. And then, every time there was some truce, or some sort of an understanding. Even though one party got defeated and the other party stood victorious, they had to live in peace for some time at least. So there was a sort of negotiated peace which was, of course, very fickle and temporary. That is why, not many years after the First World War, the Second World War broke out.

That may be an event of the distant past, but the Second World War is still fresh in our memory. Very vividly we can imagine the conditions at the time. How many lives were lost! How much misery it inflicted! We shudder to think of it. In each battle, the victorious side inflicted great misery on the defeated side. Then that war also came to an end. But has this ended the strife, the hostility, and the mutual distrust between the countries? Has it put an end to the thirst for

power of the defeated countries, who want to overcome their conquerors? So this is like a see-saw. And history documents it very well.

There has been no lasting peace at any time, from the prehistoric era up to the present moment. We think that in prehistoric times human beings were very cruel. But the same animal instincts are raging in our hearts even today. We are only trying to hide it behind a mask. Brutes are hidden behind the masks of men. They seem to be sympathetic towards one another, but in reality there is no genuine mutual understanding, respect, or cooperation among them.

Unresolved causes of conflict

We have long been trying to come to some workable solution that will enable us to live in peace. But this effort has almost always proved to be a failure. The little result that we gain is so temporary that from the very moment negotiations for peace start, preparation for another war begins. Such is our pitiable state—the condition of people who are supposed to be rational beings guided by reason. But what kind of reason is this? It is a reason that favours us, that puts us in a position of advantage. It is not a dispassionate, objective kind of reason. The result is that the causes of conflict always remain unresolved. All this means only that we are always waiting for the next catastrophe.

Everywhere this is the situation. Some people think that, because we are rational beings, through reason, negotiations, talks, understanding, and cooperation, we can reach a solution. Efforts have been made in this direction, but so far the results are not very encouraging. This does not mean that we should stop trying, but so far as results

are concerned, the situation is not very hopeful. Some people think that conditions can be remedied if our animalistic traits and brutality are kept under control. But how do we achieve this? We don't know. We have tried to keep those who disturb the peace under control, but this has proved futile.

Some people think that perhaps the methods we use to negotiate peace are themselves flawed. If we are to be cooperative, understanding, and sympathetic towards one another, we have to change ourselves. But nobody considers the need for such a change important. Everybody thinks that the other fellow should change. We forget that we must start with ourselves. The change has to come from within myself, so that first I can contribute my mite towards the establishment of peace. But nobody thinks this way.

Now, what are we going to do to remedy this situation? Shall we give up all hope? Well, man lives by hope alone. Without that we cannot live even for a single day. Suppose there is no prospect of any lasting peace. Should we then commit mass suicide? No, that is no solution! We must continue our efforts. But we have to be careful about the manner in which we negotiate for peace. *Our minds are vicious. We haven't been able to change ourselves, yet we want to change the whole world!* This is the tragedy. We have to change ourselves first. Then only will it be possible for us to understand what we have to do collectively. It is said in the Bible that we try to remove a speck from our neighbour's eye while we have a log in our own eye. This is our condition.

Another factor has to be considered. People think that transforming individuals is the business of religion. It cannot be done by

the government. But this can keep the brutality within us in check only for a little while. It will come out as soon as it has the chance. So the character of each individual has to be improved, and religion is supposed to be the means of doing it. We practise religion in order to reform ourselves, and thus gradually transform the whole world.

But religion is not much in favour nowadays. Many people consider it an anachronism. They think that religion was introduced when people couldn't be controlled by the police. It is as if religion said: 'If you are not punished here, you will be punished hereafter. You can't escape from the evil effects of your bad deeds.' Some people think that if they can drive this idea deeply enough into people's minds, they will fear the consequences and behave themselves.

That is how the idea of using religion to control people came into being. But many people blame religion for much of the bloodshed in the world. In fact, the word 'religion' has become a bugbear. We are afraid to call ourselves religious. This is because we've got the idea that religion is something fanatical and irrational. That is how religion has been wrongly interpreted today. That kind of religion is certainly not desirable, and it cannot lead to eternal peace. But if we look at the great teachings of the different religions—the teachings of great saints and sages who didn't just preach sermons and observe rituals, but who led spiritual lives and were transformed by religion—we shall see something very different.

Religion does not mean dissension and discord. The word comes from a root that means 'to bind together'. Unfortunately, a fanatical religion also binds people together,

but only to fight against other groups. That is not what religion is meant to be. People who have delved deeply into the subtleties of religion, particularly those who have had religious experiences, have lived in such a way that if we try to emulate them, we shall certainly become very different from what we are now. Isn't that what we expect from religion in its true sense? I don't mean this or that specific religion. There are certain aspects of every religion which have ennobled humankind, and which have exercised an elevating influence on the human mind; and then there are other aspects—narrow views which degrade humanity and transform people into brutes. Religion is not at fault. It is the **wrong understanding** of religion that has made the word anathema to modern people.

Science and religion

Modern people think that science has replaced religion. In ancient times people didn't understand the laws of nature. They turned to religion for knowledge. They thought that the external forces of nature were like gods or demons that had to be appeased. But those days are gone. Religion has now evolved into higher realms of thinking; it has become more a way of life. It is true that only a handful of people 'live religion', but those few are the salt of the earth. Every religion has some people who are not concerned about rituals or their own rights and privileges, but who renounce their own selfish interests for the sake of others. Selflessness is of utmost importance in a truly religious life.

Religion does not mean merely worshipping incarnations or exorcising ghosts or believing in questionable miracles. True religion has a beneficent influence on

everyone. That kind of religion is not the monopoly of any particular sect. In every religion there are saints and sages whose lives are exemplary models of selfless living, living for the sake of others. That is what should be understood by the word 'religion'. That sort of self-sacrifice or selflessness is possible when we get rid of the degrading factors within us which limit us to just this physical life—the physical body and physical enjoyments. That is how religion has to be understood; that is what will make religion an agent of change which will transform man into his ideal, which is God.

God is the highest ideal

The word 'God' we do not understand correctly nowadays. It means the highest ideal that we can conceive of. Every religion has that kind of ideal, although the masses may not understand it. There are people who are really religious. Their lives show that they live not for themselves, but for the happiness of others. That is why selflessness has been extolled in all religions.

But there are many other factors. For instance, our lives are bound by the senses. Religion invites us to go deeper into the regions where the senses cannot reach. But that does not mean obscurity, something that people won't understand. It means something that we can experience in the same way that we experience sense objects. God will be realized in a blissful and intimate way. We shall be with God, and we shall be God ourselves. That is what religion has to do. *It has to change man into the divine.*

That right type of religion is necessary for our understanding and for our practice. We should not be scared by the idea that the truth cannot be stated, cannot be communicated, that God is beyond thought

and words. This idea should not confuse us. We know that our innermost feelings are inexpressible and incommunicable. So the highest religious experience is the feeling that one is identical with the highest ideal. Religion has to lead us from where we are, to the highest ideal. As we move towards the ideal, our conception of it will undergo change and transformation. Those who are seeking the ideal will also gradually be transformed, and the culmination will come when all that is good is my God, and my God and I are one and the same. That is the highest expression of mysticism. It has to be expressed that way. Otherwise, simply elaborating the teachings of religious leaders who adhere to narrow ideals will bring more dissensions, more bloodshed, more quarrels.

It is time for us to think deeply and find out how we can reform ourselves. This is very clearly stated and explained in mystical language in almost all religions. But that language we have misinterpreted, and the result is that we are bogged down in a sort of narrowness and parochialism. That is what the fate of this world is.

So let us try to understand this statement of the Upanishads: 'I am everywhere.' If I am everywhere, if I harm anybody I harm myself. That sort of vision has to be impressed upon everybody. We cannot live in isolation. One gets a feeling of isolation when one lives for oneself only. We are living in our small shells, and then we are also fighting with one another. Let us break the shell, and let that universal truth dawn in every one of us. That is the scope of religion. Religion will tell us that God is everywhere. He is as much in me as in my enemy. Since everywhere there is the same God, there cannot be any enemy, there cannot be any hostility. That is the idea.

Religion has to be taught, to be pursued and rightly understood. Mere rituals are not religion. Rituals need not be discarded. They may be helpful in the beginning. But as we proceed further and further, we must leave the kindergarten class behind. We will have to rise higher and higher in order to understand the deeper meanings of religion. The deeper meaning is that it is from Him that the whole universe has emanated. Almost all the religious scriptures say the same thing, that God is everywhere and that He has created the whole world. And it is a mistake to think that He has created the world like a watchmaker who makes a watch which has nothing more to do with its maker. The world is not created that way. It is the emanation of that Spirit. It is the emanation of God, Who is everywhere. *The same Principle is everywhere. And if we can have a clear understanding of that eternally existent factor everywhere, there cannot be any reason for fights and mutual discord.*

That is the role that religion has to play in bringing about world peace. You may say that it is Utopian. I say it is not more Utopian than to think that we can establish permanent peace through negotiations, when we are just looking for a chance to pounce on the other fellow and destroy him. Is it not much more probable that religious ideas, if properly pursued, will be a source of eternal peace? Or at least a factor that will draw people toward that eternal peace?

Whether eternal peace will ever be achieved or not, we do not know. But we know this much, that it is worth striving for, worth attempting to transform ourselves into the highest ideal that we can think of. As we do that, by that very process, we shall

gradually be improving ourselves. We shall thus be a factor working towards the uplifting of the environment as a whole. The entire environment will be uplifted by individuals who live in real and earnest pursuit of religion.

That religion will include every aspect of life. Everywhere it will have its effect. Once we live a really religious life, we cannot live in fragments, where one part of us will be religious and the other part will remain secular. The distinction will completely disappear. God will be revealed in everything, and whatever we do will be a prayer, will be worship of God. 'Whatever we do, O Mother, is Thy worship.' That worship will find expression in our every act, in every movement of our lives. That will gradually be a great force for bringing about everlasting peace among ourselves. Even if it is merely a question of probability, still it is worth trying; because if we try, we shall at least be approaching the ideal rather than running away from it and leaving the world to languish in discord, dissension, and mutual annihilation.

May we all have that sort of vision so that we can be one with all existence! I will be happy only when everyone is happy, I will be unhappy if anyone remains unhappy. I will be liberated when everyone is liberated. I will be bound when anyone is bound. That is the high truth that truly religious people will manifest in their lives. Their hearts will be so expansive that no one will be left outside the ambit of their lives. That sort of *spiritualization of all life* is the goal of religion, and that religion will naturally have the greatest role to play in achieving everlasting peace in the world. ■

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