

The Religion We Need

SWAMI ANANYANANDA

Two great forces have been exerting their powerful influences on the minds of men during the past few decades. They are science and humanism. Science and humanism have become the dominant features of the modern age. Science has achieved astounding results for the happiness of man and, let us hasten to add, also for the unhappiness of man. Humanism has led mankind in two different directions: proletarian socialistic authoritarianism, on the one hand, and secularized democratic governments and institutions, on the other, both of which, working purely on secular humanistic principles, have betrayed man and robbed him of his spiritual essence.

The progress that science has made today is the symbol of man's untiring efforts to conquer nature and to make it serve his own ends. In this, he has taken amazing strides which are nothing short of a miracle. Applied science has conferred on man innumerable benefits, making his life more comfortable and less burdensome. In every sphere of activity, science and the things of science have got mixed up so inextricably with our lives that we can hardly realize what would have happened to us without them. Science is still probing deeper into the secrets of nature. What will yet be possible for science in this realm is beyond one's imagination or guess. That is the picture of science we get when we look at its beneficent aspect, its constructive side, which has brought ease and comfort to the

physical existence of man. But science, with all its gifts to humanity, has not touched even the fringe of the life of the spirit. The soul of man is hungering for spiritual solace.

The other side

Look at the other side of the picture of science, its dreadful and destructive side. Humanity today is at the mercy of science. Man has created a Frankenstein's monster which is threatening to destroy its very creator. Science has placed in the hands of man such deadly instruments of death and destruction which, if let loose in a moment of miscalculation or misunderstanding, will make short work of all our boasted human civilization. This is a possibility which science has created for man today. Is this to be the end of all human culture, its civilization, and its proud achievements? What is the drawback in our scientific culture? The answer is that while man is extending the frontiers of his knowledge, he is not correspondingly growing in wisdom that comes from spiritual culture. Man today is losing faith in the higher values of religion; he lacks a spiritual basis for his life.

Secularized humanism, in one direction, has gradually led to the formation of totalitarian socialistic States, where all human endeavour is turned towards the glorification of the State. In the opposite direction, secularized humanism has led to the establishment of democratic governments and institutions, where the dignity and worth of the individual are

recognized and respected, and where individual efforts and State endeavours are directed towards the welfare of the community.

In totalitarian countries, the State is supreme; the individual, his good and welfare, all must fit into the pattern of the State. The State is the new god of these socialistic countries. At the altar of this mighty god of the monolithic society, the high priests are the handful of men at the summit of the social pyramid, in whose hands are concentrated all forms of power, social, economic, and political, and who 'know all, do all, and decide all'. Their word is law, and no opposition to it is ever countenanced. The individual's interests must be subservient to the interests of the State—the will of the government that is.

In the democracies, however, the individual occupies the supreme position. The government is a servant of the people. The government in a democracy is 'of the people, by the people, and for the people'. The State is a Welfare State, which works for the happiness and progress of the individual and the community. These two forms of society, socialistic and democratic, both purely humanistic in approach and working in two different directions, are contending for leadership in the world today.

There is yet another feature of the modern world. In the international sphere, humanism is finding expression in the laudable efforts of men and nations for the advancement of mankind through world organizations, not only in the political, social, and economic spheres, but also in the educational, scientific, and cultural fields. These organisations are working on the principle that the whole of humanity is one vast family, and that every nation should be helped to preserve its peculiar characteristic and practise its beliefs without hindrance or

interference. True, the concept of mankind-as-a-whole is taking a realistic form on the physical plane. Science and technology have made the physical integration of humanity a reality today; but for its *emotional integration*, which is so very essential for its future progress, humanity is lacking the requisite spiritual approach and basis.

The tragedy

The tragedy of our times is that, with all the progress achieved by science and humanism, mankind is nowhere near the goal of peace. Mankind has arrived at the crossroads; it is facing a crisis in civilization. Neither science nor humanism can restore it to a settled condition. It is only the understanding of the spiritual values and bringing them to work in all the spheres of human activity that can restore man's lost equilibrium. What is needed at this juncture is a widening of horizons, a spiritual awakening, a recovery of faith, to go beyond the merely physical and the psychological and recognize the spiritual, which is the deepest core and the real basis of the whole universe. Far deeper than any social, economic, or political readjustment, mankind is in need of a readjustment on the spiritual plane. Mankind should recover its faith in things spiritual. Science and humanism must work with a new spiritual vision and shed their secular character. It is then that these two forces will find fulfilment and be a blessing to humanity. Nurtured for decades in the thought and atmosphere of science, men in general had forgotten to believe in the spiritual order of things. But, today, when they have arrived at the crossroads, they are willing to believe. As Kingsley Martin says: 'Men and women are now unable to face the loneliness and aridity of the gospel of science, and therefore, though without any settled faith in

religious dogmas, seek a personal religion to give them inner comfort. They do not believe but they desire to believe. I see very clearly every day . . . that the will to believe cannot be overcome.' It was Blake who said: 'Man must and will have some religion. If he has not the religion of Jesus, he will have the religion of Satan.' That is precisely what has happened in the realms of science and secularized humanism. Mankind is in despair today. A sense of *spiritual homelessness* is growing strong in the minds of men. It cannot continue for long. To live without faith is impossible. Even as nature abhors a vacuum, the soul of man has a horror of emptiness.

Sectarian religion, ritual ridden and dogmatic, with inflexible beliefs and steel-framed doctrines, does not and cannot satisfy the free spirit of the modern man. He needs, and is in search of, a rational faith. We must present him, in the words of Dr Radhakrishnan, with a religion that is 'distinctive, universally valid, sufficient, and authoritative, one that has an understanding of the fresh sense of truth and the awakened social passion, . . . which does not mock the free spirit of man by arbitrary dogmas or hesitating negations, a new vision of God in whose name we can launch a crusade against the strange cults which are now competing for mastery over the souls of men' (*Recovery of Faith*, p. 74). Vedanta offers a religion which fulfils all these conditions; it is rational and universal, non-dogmatic and all-comprehensive, intensely human and profoundly spiritual.

A way of life in God

True spiritual life has no concern with superstitious beliefs and elaborate ceremonials. It has nothing to do with rites and rituals. It has no set conventions to be observed. Spirituality is not belief in

mythology. It is a way of life founded on certain fundamental truths that are eternal and universal. It is a way of life in God and for God. It is the practice of the presence of God. It is a way in which one lives, moves, and has one's being in God. It is a conscious effort to manifest the divine qualities that are in man, and to make them permeate his thought, word, and deed. It is a life by which one becomes divine and helps others become divine, too. It is a life which enables man to pierce through the veil of matter and to behold the self-effulgence of the spirit, in whose light all things are illumined and by whose presence everything lives and moves. It is a life of universal consciousness, where all petty notions of individuality, of 'me' and 'mine', disappear. Spirituality is 'a flight of the alone to the Alone'. In the final spiritual realization, the individual consciousness is merged with the universal Consciousness. There is complete absence of all duality. In the words of the Upanishad:

*Yatra nānyat pashyati nānyat shrinoti
nānyat vijānāti sā bhumā—
(Chāndogya Upanishad, VII.xxiv.1)*

It is a state 'in which one sees nothing else, hears nothing else, understands nothing else'. It is a life that is infinite and immortal.

It is not possible for man to live without faith. He must have some kind of faith to live on. If his faith is not in spiritual things, it will be in material things. If it is not in God and things divine, it will be in the world and things worldly. He will need something for which he has to live and function. He will seek to have some ideal, some goal, for which he can work and to attain which he will bend all his energies and resources, physical and mental. Vedanta offers to man a faith which pertains to the innermost reality of his being. It says that the soul of man is essentially divine. It urges man to

realize the truth of his being and manifest it in his life. It emphasizes that the purpose of life is to experience Divinity here and now, both within and without, by disciplining one's life and conquering one's baser propensities. Irrespective of race or religion, class or community, Vedanta invites one and all and throws open its doors to its spiritual treasure.

Today, man is in search of a religion which should satisfy not only his heart and soul, but his intellect as well. It should be in harmony with the spirit of the times. It should be rational enough to stand the scrutiny of modern thought. It should 'not mock the free spirit of man by arbitrary dogmas or hesitating negations'. It should be non-exclusive, non-dogmatic, and universal, to embrace all humanity in its fold. It should negate nothing that is progressive. It should be all-inclusive and accept all forms of earnest religious endeavour. It should be extremely human in its approach, so that it can tackle all human problems and situations. It should be deeply spiritual to touch and transform the very essential being of man—to make man realize that he is divine. That is the type of religion that humanity is in need of today. Vedanta offers such a religion.

Claims of Vedanta

Let me now proceed to examine, point by point, this claim made on behalf of Vedanta. Vedanta is rational. The conclusions of Vedanta are scientific, inasmuch as they exactly harmonize with the aspirations of the age and with the conclusions to which modern science is coming at the present time. The difference between the two, if any, is only in the mode of expressing their respective conclusions. As Swami Vivekananda said: 'The

conclusions of modern science are the very conclusions the Vedanta reached ages ago; only, in modern science, they are written in the language of matter.' The affirmations of Vedanta are made in the language of the spiritual world, while the conclusions of modern science are made in the language of the material world.

Science has proved the unreality of space and time, as well as the inadequacy of the assumptions of uniformity and causality. Space-time is a single concept, according to modern science. It is viewed as a continuum and spoken of as the fourth dimension of objects. The myth of matter is exploded. Matter is now looked upon as congealed energy. The theory of relativity, which has revolutionized our concept about the mysterious and ever-expanding universe, the quantum theory pertaining to the infinitude and indeterminate nature of the minutest atoms, the concept of matter as energy, which is the ultimate constituent of every object in the universe, and whose nature and characteristics are yet to be determined, all these go to substantiate the fundamental theories of Vedanta relating to the universe around us. Science speaks of one and the same energy that is hidden behind both the infinitely small atoms and the infinitely large stars and planets. Vedanta uses a different language to express the same truth; its language is of the spirit, of the Self:

*Anoraniyān-mahatomahiyān
ātmā'sya jantornihito guhāyām—
(Katha Upanishad, I.ii.20)*

'The Self that is subtler than the subtle and greater than the great is lodged in the heart of every creature.'

Vedanta speaks of the highest Reality as spiritual, which is one and all-pervading. All existence is only its manifestation. The

universe we see is our mental projection, *cittaspandana*. It is only an appearance; it has no absolute reality. Its substratum is Brahman, the supreme Reality, which is beyond space, time, and causation. That is the changeless Reality behind all the changeful phenomena. Behind the many, One alone is real, and all is that: *Sarvam khalu idam Brahma*.

Relatively speaking, Vedanta accepts three degrees of reality: *vyāvahārika* or empirical, *prātibhāsika* or apparent or illusory, and *pāramārthika* or transcendental. Modern science also accepts the empirical reality of the objective world, and on this basis it proceeds with its investigation. At the same time, it knows that the final truth of the objective world is one infinite mass of energy, whose intrinsic nature science has not yet been able to know. According to Vedanta, the spirit is the fundamental and final reality behind every object in this universe. This is true of both the external nature of the universe and the internal nature of man. From the transcendental standpoint, there is no difference whatsoever between the macrocosm and the microcosm.

Vedanta says that *drishya*, ie all that is seen, the objective world, is illusory. The only reality is *drik*, the seer, the subject, the witness. The witness, *sākshin*, cannot become the object of any knowledge. It is the witness of all change. For facility of understanding, the same reality, expressing itself as the macrocosm, is called Brahman; and, expressing itself as the microcosm, is called Ātman. Brahman and Ātman are not two realities. They are one and identical. It is the same spirit, which is infinite and all-pervading. The Upanishad says:

*Agniryathaiko bhuvanam pravishto rupam
rupam pratirupo babhuva,*

*Ekastathā sarvabhutāntarātmā rupam
rupam pratirupo bahishca—*

(Katha Upanishad, II.ii.9)

‘Just as fire, though one, having entered the world, assumes separate forms in respect of different shapes, similarly, the Self inside all beings, though one, assumes a form in respect of each shape; and yet it is outside.’

Echoing, as it were, the Vedantic view of the spirit as the abiding witness of all actual or possible states of consciousness, Sir Arthur S. Eddington makes a significant statement: ‘What is the truth about ourselves? We may incline to various answers. We are a bit of star gone wrong. We are complicated physical machinery—puppets that strut and talk and laugh and die as the hand of time turns the handle beneath. But let us remember that there is one elementary inescapable answer: We are that which asks the question.’ The Upanishad asks:

Vijnātāram are kena vijāniyāt—

(Brihadāranyaka Upanishad, II.iv.14)

‘Through what should one know the Knower?’

Vedanta does not ask anyone to believe anything blindly. It does not ask anyone to take anything for granted. It asks everyone to experiment for himself personally to test the truths it enunciates, and to accept only then what is found to be reasonable and acceptable both to the head and the heart. *Yukti*, reasoning, and *anubhuti*, personal experience, are the chief criteria for the understanding of truth, according to Vedanta. What is learnt through *shruti*, ie hearing from the teacher and learning from the scriptures, should be subjected to reasoning and experienced personally. The Vedantic *sāadhanā* consists of the threefold method of *shravana*, *manana*, and

nididhyāsana—hearing the spiritual truths from the teacher and learning about them from the scriptures, reflecting and reasoning about them, and personally experiencing the truths thus ascertained.

To arrive rationally at the unreality of the objective world, Vedanta resorts to an analysis of the *avasthātraya*—the three states of human experience, namely, waking, dream, and deep sleep. By means of a thorough-going analysis, it shows that just as the dream world, with all its experiences, is found to be unreal on waking, similarly, the world that is perceived in our waking state, with all its objects and experiences, is realized to be unreal from the transcendental standpoint. Even as the dream objects are our mental creations, the objective world of the waking state is projected by the cosmic mind. The objects of both the dream world and the waking world have no reality from the standpoint of the Absolute. In this connection, it is interesting to note what Bertrand Russell says with regard to the nature of the external world: ‘We do not ever see what we think we see. . . . In metaphysics, my creed is short and simple. I think that the external world may be an illusion, but if it exists, it consists of events, short, small, and haphazard. Order, unity, and continuity are human inventions, just as truly as are catalogues and encyclopaedias.’

Thus we find that the ultimate affirmations of Vedanta are in complete harmony with the aspirations of the present age, and give a fillip to the conclusions of modern scientific thought.

Universal Vedanta

Vedanta is universal. The religion and philosophy of Vedanta are universal in their concept as well as application. They are not built around personalities, but on universal

principles which were realized by highly evolved spiritual souls. They are like scientific laws which are eternal and universal. They relate to the undying, divine nature of the soul and the oneness of the spiritual Being that underlies all manifold manifestations. These truths have been shining before humanity ever since they were first spoken to man. They have been shining before every generation, beckoning man to understand them, to live up to them, and to realize them. They are there before us today, calling us to discover our real nature and to tread the path of divine life. Despite the passage of centuries, despite the vicissitudes of history, despite the rise and fall of civilizations, despite the emergence and fading out of multitudes of religious faiths and cults, the immortal teachings of Vedanta have come down to us in their undimmed glory. These eternal truths shine beyond history, beyond all human situations. Yet they live and vibrate in history and through human situations. In every era, in every generation, men of spiritual insight have caught the glimpse of the shining light of Vedanta, followed its path, and realized the goal of life.

Vedanta explains the universal laws that govern spiritual life. It clarifies the universal principles underlying all religions and creeds. Speaking about its universality, Max Müller writes: ‘The Vedanta philosophy leaves to every man a wide sphere of real usefulness, and places him under a law as strict and binding as anything can be in this transitory life. It leaves him a deity to worship as omnipotent and majestic as the deities of any other religion. It has room for almost every religion, nay, it embraces them all.’

Vedanta does not denounce any religious faith or creed. Its basic philosophy

is that Truth is one, and it appears in diverse forms according to the needs and moods of the votaries of different religions. All religious endeavours are attempts to catch a glimpse of the selfsame Reality. Every one, according to his inner culture and spiritual worth, is proceeding towards the same goal. The final destiny of every one is the same. The Upanishad says:

Yato vā imāni bhūtāni jāyante, yena jātāni jīvanti,

*Yat prayantya bhisamvishanti, tadvi-
jñāsva, tad Brahma—*

(Taittiriya Upanishad, III.1)

‘That from which all these beings take birth, that by which they live after being born, that towards which they move and into which they merge—desire to know that; that is Brahman.’

Vedanta lends a helping hand to everyone and encourages everybody to proceed on the spiritual path until the goal is reached. To help man to manifest his divine nature is the main purpose of Vedanta. How it is to be realized, by what method, or through which religious path, these are of secondary importance. Modes and methods vary from man to man. Each one will develop according to his intellectual, moral, and spiritual capacity and equipment. This fact is recognized in Vedanta as a basic concept of spiritual life. Hence it is not impatient. It does not coerce people into ways that are alien to their nature and temperament. To each one according to his need, and to help each one from where he stands, is the aim of Vedanta.

There may be as many modes of approach as there are individuals. One method may not suit all. One religion may not appeal to all. One form of God may not inspire devotion in the hearts of all. So Vedanta accepts variety and multiplicity in

the mode of approach. All radii must converge at the centre of a circle. God is the centre of the universe. He is the source and the sustaining power of the world. He is the goal of every path. Vedanta does not fight in the name of religion. It has no place for dogmatism, fanaticism, and sectarianism. This Vedantic view of all religious endeavours finally culminating in the realization of God has been beautifully expressed in a well-known Sanskrit verse, which says:

*Rucinām vaicitryād riju kutila nānā-
pathajushām,*

*Nrinām eko gamyah tvamasi payasāmar-
nava iva—*

(Shivamahimnah-stotra, 7)

‘As the different streams, having their sources in different places, all mingle their waters in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, curved or straight, all lead to Thee.’

This verse typically embodies the universal spirit of Vedanta, as it has been lived and practised by generations of devoted people in this hallowed land of India.

Vedanta is intensely human. Shri Gaudapāda describes the knowledge of Vedanta as *sarva-sattva-sukha*, a giver of bliss to all beings. Vedanta has no dispute with anyone. It views Reality as a whole. It understands Reality in its all-comprehensive nature, and as free from all relationships, internal or external. Vedanta leads to universal toleration. A correct understanding of all religious effort in the light of Vedanta, as a matter of fact, of all endeavour directed towards human welfare and happiness, will tend towards better relationships between human beings. It will remove all sources of fear and hatred among people and help in

bringing them together in harmony and fellowship. Under the hegemony of Vedanta, there will be no fanaticism of any kind.

The spirit of universal toleration, which is the message of Vedanta, must permeate all the spheres of human activity today, if our civilization is to survive. No civilization can last long unless this idea enters into its heart's blood. No culture or civilization can progress unless fanaticism of every kind—religious or cultural, social or political—dies out. Bloodshed and brutality, which invariably accompany a dogmatic propagation of ideas, are not the marks of a progressive civilization. They besmirch the fair face of humanity; they are a blot on human nature. No civilization can raise its head unless human beings learn to look upon one another charitably. Nay more, not only to be charitable and sympathetic, but to be positively helpful to each other are the signs of human progress and civilization. That is what Vedanta teaches us. That attitude is the crying need of the modern world.

Spiritual oneness

Another great idea that the world can take with advantage from Vedanta is its grand concept of the spiritual oneness of the whole universe. Modern researches in the field of physics have shown how, physically speaking, every object in the universe—the sun, the moon, the star, all human beings, all animate and inanimate objects—every object in the universe is but a little wave or wavelet in the infinite ocean of energy. Vedanta goes one step further and says that behind all manifestation there is but one Soul, one Existence, which is spiritual. Vedanta designates It as *Sat-Cit-Ānanda*, Existence-Consciousness-Bliss Absolute. It says that these are not the attributes of the supreme Reality, but its very essence and intrinsic

nature. This great idea of the spiritual solidarity of the whole universe can form the solid foundation of many a humanistic movement, based on love and sympathy, charity and compassion, sacrifice and service.

Love of self is the greatest incentive to all human activity. In the light of Vedanta, the very concept of self undergoes a change. It becomes part and parcel of the universal Self. The person whom I love, and whom I wish to serve, is none other than myself spiritually, but placed only in a different set of external circumstances. He and I are one in spirit. By serving him, I serve myself; I ennoble myself and discover the spiritual bond that unites us both. Vedanta says that none helps another; one helps oneself. It is for the sake of the Self that everything exists. It is for the sake of the Self that everything becomes beloved and dear:

Ātmanastu kāmāya sarvam priyam bhavati—

(Bṛihadāranyaka Upanishad, II.iv.5)

One loves oneself most. It is a patent fact. None can gainsay it. Vedanta lifts this notion of Self to a higher level, and makes man perceive his own Self in all beings and all beings in his own Self. The Upanishad says:

Yastu sarvāni bhūtāni ātmanyevānupashyati,

Sarvabhuteshu cātmānam tato na vijugupsate. . . .

Tatra ko mohah kah shokah ekatvamanupashyatah—

(Ishā Upanishad, 6, 7)

‘For the seer of oneness, there can be no sorrow or delusion; such a one is free from all hatred.’

There cannot be a greater inspiration than this life-giving ideal of Vedanta to

effectively work for the upliftment of all people, socially as well as spiritually. There cannot be a more lofty, a more truly spiritual ideal than this for the expression of love and compassion in human relationships. Neither can ethics and morality find a more stable and sound basis than this grand concept of Vedanta—the spiritual solidarity and oneness of all beings.

Vedanta is profoundly spiritual. Indeed, such a statement is redundant. Vedanta is nothing if not spiritual. Its chief concern is with things spiritual. Its basic truth is spiritual. Its way of life is spiritual. Its message is for the spiritual awakening of humanity. It speaks of the divine nature of man and matter, and exhorts everyone to wake up to that spiritual consciousness. It urges everyone to get free from the clutches of *māyā*, which is concealing the truth from the vision of man and projecting the illusory appearance of this world.

Vedanta offers man the method and the means by which he can get liberation from the bondage of matter. By self-discipline and by cultivating moral and ethical virtues, man is enabled to develop purity of heart and shed his lower identifications with body, mind, intellect, etc. When the heart becomes completely pure, there shines the resplendent light of the Paramātman, the supreme Self. Vedanta says:

*Dehābhīmāne galite vijnāte paramātmani,
Yatra yatra mano yāti tatra tatra
samādhayah—*

(Drig-drishya-viveka, 30)

‘When the attachment to body etc has disappeared, when the perception of the

Paramātman becomes crystal clear, then, wherever the mind alights, there it gets *samadhi* (superconscious state).’

That is the highest state of spiritual realization in Vedanta, where One alone shines, and all duality is absent. This realization brings supreme joy, as the Self is the source of all *ānanda*. That is *Brahmānanda*, beyond which there is no greater *ānanda*, and of which all mundane joys and pleasures are but feeble and infinitesimally small reflections.

If religion is to lead man to eternal joy and happiness, the path shown by Vedanta is straight and easy. Vedanta is the fountain of spiritual knowledge. It is founded on spiritual truths which are eternal and universal. Its nectarous waters are available for anyone who wishes to have his fill and attain immortality. Religion, according to Vedanta, must culminate in realization. As the Upanishad puts it:

*Sa yo ha vai tatparamam Brahma veda
brahmaiva bhavati . . . taratishokam tarati
pāpmānam*

Guhāgranthibhyo vimukto ’mrito bhavati—

(Mundaka Upanishad, II.ii.9)

‘Anyone who knows that supreme Brahman becomes Brahman indeed. . . . He overcomes all grief and rises above all aberrations; and becoming freed from the knots of the heart, he attains immortality.’

Thus Vedanta is supremely suited to play the role of a universal religion, as it not only meets the demands of the present age of science and reason, but also satisfies the deeper spiritual urges of the human soul. Vedanta is the religion we need today. ■

* Swami Ananyananda was for some years the Joint Editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*. Previously he was closely connected with the Institute for a number of years, working on the Institute’s encyclopaedic publication *The Cultural Heritage of India*. This article is based on a lecture Swami Ananyananda gave at the Institute on 7 August, 1962.