

The Role of Religion in the Modern World

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In these days so many forces other than religion—cultural, social, and scientific, economic, political, and military—are at work to make a better world. Man's secular interests are so pressing, varied, and captivating that one may wonder if religion is essential in modern life, if religion is going to be outworn or outmoded. But a careful analysis of the situation assures one that religion has to play a vital, a unique, role in the complex life of today and that it can effectively contribute to man's happiness and security in this progressive age.

Modern problems and their root cause

Many are the problems of the modern man. How can religion solve them? One of the outstanding problems is how to avert the nuclear war that threatens mankind with extinction. Warlike men are prone to think that the very fear of total destruction can serve as a deterrent to war. But this is not a safe course to follow. It is most hazardous and inhuman. If civilization has to live by such diabolic means, then it is not worth the name. In the very process of saving civilization, you are killing it. The safe and sane measure is, of course, to cultivate mutual understanding, trust, and fellow-feeling among individuals and nations. This is what religion urges. By frightening one another, nations can never be united. The leaders of mighty nations, however, feel the necessity of solving the problem of war by negotiation. But, unfortunately, they rely too

much on military might and diplomatic tactics, while their success depends on their moral integrity, their adherence to truth, justice, and humanitarianism. As long as they think more intensely of war than of peace, how can they find the way to peace? Let them explore all the avenues of peace as zealously as they are trying to develop the means of destruction. Then they will find peace by a peaceful approach.

Usually, the socio-political leaders aim at solving life's problems by an adjustment of the external conditions. Many are the courses they follow. With the aid of science and technology, they try to alleviate the miseries of men and promote their well-being. They develop arts and industries and establish technical institutes and research centres. They carry on an extensive programme of social work and found hospitals and clinics. They introduce new political, economic, and social systems, enact laws, national and international, and make pacts and treaties among countries. Even then they cannot cope with the situation. The point is that all these measures for the welfare of mankind, for the peace and progress of the world, varied and extensive though they be, are by nature inadequate for the purpose, because they do not go to the root of human problems.

To solve life's problems effectively we have to remove their root cause. If we trace their origin, we find that they arise, in most cases, not exactly from man's external conditions, but from his inner weaknesses.

His social, economic, and political problems are oftener than not grounded in his moral nature. Usually, it is lack of self-control and right understanding that either creates or aggravates man's difficulties. Human problems are primarily psychological and not biological. As long as a person carries within him any of these dark forces, such as greed, pride, hatred, anger, jealousy, fear, and suspicion, he will have trouble wherever he may be. He can make a hell of heaven. There is no question that the lack of moral integrity in individuals and nations makes the world problems all the more complicated and difficult to solve. Their solution depends, in the last analysis, on man's inner goodness. None of these can be solved satisfactorily if man's inner life be not sound. The world is confronted basically with moral problems. If human nature deteriorates, if man deliberately subordinates ethical ideals to material interests, and if expediency be the golden rule, no law, no system, no pact, and no social gospel, however well-advised, can save the world.

Here religion comes to our aid. It pays particular attention to man's inner life. To elevate the inner man is its special function. By developing the spiritual outlook on life, it stabilizes man's moral nature, which is essential to his material well-being. We shall explain how.

**The message of religion is
for one and all**

Despite the divergences of doctrines, beliefs, and practices, three fundamental truths form the common background of all religions worth the name. Firstly, there is, in the view of all religions, an ideal Reality, which answers to man's conception of perfection. This is declared to be the supreme Being that sustains and manifests the universe. This is also conceived as

'spiritual' reality, self-existent and self-aware, distinct from the psycho-physical realm of phenomena.

Secondly, all religions acknowledge, directly or indirectly, an inherent relation between man and the supreme Being. Man is essentially a spiritual being. His real self is neither the physical body nor the body-mind complex, but the immortal Spirit, akin to the Highest. The spiritual relation between man and the supreme Being is the keynote of religious life.

Thirdly, according to all religions, man's self-fulfilment is in the realization of his essential relation with the supreme Being. This is the highest goal of human life. In the view of most theistic faiths the relation culminates in union with God; in the view of non-dualistic Vedanta, in identity with the Godhead.

Spirituality is the core of religion. He who recognizes the above three spiritual principles and tries to live in conformity with them is regarded as a spiritual aspirant. He is said to have developed a spiritual outlook on life. This serves two important purposes. In the first place, it makes life meaningful. Secondly, it makes life sound and secure.

With the development of the spiritual outlook on life, a person clearly apprehends the true purpose of life. The world we live in, howsoever real it may appear to be, is far from an ideal existence. It gives us no assurance even for the fulfilment of our legitimate hopes and desires. Notwithstanding all human endeavours to ameliorate the conditions of life, notwithstanding all dreams of 'inevitable progress' and 'ever-increasing perfection', the world persists in being a battleground of good and evil forces, a welter of such opposites as pleasure and pain, growth and decay, order and disorder, light and

darkness. There is no prospect of unmixed blessing here. Yet man cherishes in his heart the highest ideals of beauty, goodness, joy and freedom. There is within him an innate longing for the Best, the Perfect. So the questions arise: Is there no way to its fulfilment? Is this noblest urge for the supreme Good bound to die out? Should man ignore or suppress it? The spiritual leaders answer: No. There is an ideal Reality transcending all dualities, which you can reach, beyond which there is nothing more to seek. This is the culmination of all knowledge. This is the fulfilment of all desires. This is what you have to live for. To seek security in the insecure is not your destiny. Death is not your final end. You are to attain the Imperishable through the perishable; the Infinite through the finite; the Perfect through the imperfect. With this end in view, you should regulate all the affairs of life, harmonize all your movements, and co-ordinate all your thoughts, words, and deeds.

This is the message of religion. And it is for one and all. Anyone, at whatever level of life, can turn to the Highest, because the kinship between an individual and the supreme Being holds good, whether the person is young or old, pure or impure, wise or unwise, rich or poor, whole or maimed. Thus religion holds before all the promise of complete liberation, peace, and blessedness. In case you deny the spiritual ideal, in case you hold to earthly prosperity, power, and pleasure as the main objectives of life, what message can you have for the aged in their declining years, or for the young whose future prospects are blighted by mishap?

Material values and moral virtues

We have seen how religion unveils the meaning of life. Now, we shall see how it promotes order and security. Material progress, unsupported by moral ideals, is

insecure and deceptive. Wealth proves to be a curse when the owner does not know its right use. Power misdirected is a positive evil. Scientific knowledge abused proves to be a menace to humanity. Freedom, political or economic, without a regulative principle, does more harm than good. The edifice of world prosperity and power has to be built on a sound moral foundation. What weakens man's moral nature? The tendency to attach more importance to material values than to the moral. It is delusive. Religion turns man's attention to the inner life and impresses on him the value of moral ideals. He learns that, while moral virtues insure inner strength, joy, and freedom, material power and possessions, however glaring, do not. One may gain prosperity by unfair means, but not peace of mind. Wealth does not necessarily make a man purer, stronger, happier, or wiser. It is true that external resources are necessary to life, yet a person should not barter away inner goodness for them. Whatever wealth he may acquire, whatever pleasures he may seek, he should always keep firm on the path of virtue.

He who strives for the spiritual ideal knows that material power and possessions cannot help him as much as moral virtues. While inner purity is indispensable to spiritual growth, worldly prosperity is not. None can see the light of Truth unless the mind is tranquil and transparent. It is incumbent on a spiritual aspirant to adhere to moral principles.

Further, religion points out that man's real interest is not in self-seeking, but in self-denial. Unselfishness is the basic moral quality. It fosters other virtues. It is a blessing in itself. It leads to self-expansion. Selfishness is detrimental to man's best interests. It is the root of all vices. It causes self-contraction. As a result, whatever power, love, joy, and freedom a selfish

person may have becomes more and more restricted. On the other hand, an unselfish person develops all these qualities with self-expansion. Self-fulfilment lies in self-expansion. The more you feel your unity with others in spirit, the closer you come to the supreme Being, who enfolds and unites all individual selves as the Soul of all souls. The more you feel your kinship with the supreme Being, the deeper is your relationship with your fellow-creatures. You look upon them not only as brothers and sisters, but as the varied images of yourself. Then you can follow the precept: 'Love thy neighbour as thyself.' Thus, the spiritual outlook transforms man's inner life, remodels his dealings with others, and is therefore conducive to world order and security.

The imperative need of moral and spiritual values for the stability of material progress cannot be ignored. The politico-social leaders may develop machinery, fully industrialize a country, and raise the living conditions of the people very high, yet their economic problem will not be solved, if proper care is not taken for the moral advancement of the people. As long as greed dominates the minds of the people, as long as inordinate sense-desires provoke them, wants will multiply, competition will become keener, and the conflict between the employer and the employed will grow increasingly severe. Similarly, clinics and hospitals cannot solve the problems of disease, unless the people learn to live with moderation. Peace treaties cannot solve the problem of war, as long as nations seek self-interest at the cost of truth, justice, and humanitarianism. At the present time, juvenile delinquency is alarmingly increasing in the U.S.A. Can we say police force and criminal laws can solve the problem, while the minds of the youth

receive no moral and spiritual inspiration?

**This-worldly attitude
and its consequences**

The twentieth-century modern man in general is not opposed to religion. He is rather indifferent to it. He is not an atheist, nor an agnostic, nor a sceptic of the nineteenth-century type. This change of attitude towards religion may be due partly to the advancement of scientific thought in the present age. Physical science no longer holds to the old materialistic and mechanistic outlook on life and the world, but has a deeper view of the phenomenal existence and the underlying reality. Its conception of the universe does not contract the existence of God as supreme Being beyond the range of sense-perception. *The modern man does not usually deny God, but has a tendency to ignore Him.* He thinks that he can take care of the world without the help of God, that he can make this life self-sufficient without taking into account what is beyond. Equipped with scientific knowledge and technology, he is set on making this earth a happy, prosperous, and secure place to live in. He has a this-worldly attitude, which is very often applauded as life-affirmative. But, unfortunately, it does not produce the desired effect. One can very well see through its speciousness. It is responsible considerably for the present predicament of the world.

The point is this: If we do not include in our scheme of life any higher existence beyond, our minds naturally become focused on the sensible world. As a result, the sensuous outlook on life prevails. To enjoy earthly existence in all the variety and richness of sense-experience becomes the ideal of life. Knowledge is cultivated for practical ends. Science, philosophy, arts, and ethics become increasingly subservient to

the interests of the sense-life. Consequently, they degenerate; they lose their uplifting force. Material achievement is acclaimed as the measure of man's happiness, intellectual ability, and even moral advancement. As a matter of fact, such a false idea of human progress has prevailed in the Western world for over three hundred years. Sense-appetites are insatiable by nature. They debase the mind, if not well regulated. It has already been pointed out that when man's inner nature deteriorates, material power and prosperity become insecure and perilous. In fact, cold and hot wars, on a large or small scale, ensue. This is what has happened in modern times.

Even the spread of education, which is usually considered to be the panacea of evil, can be of little help, when the sensuous outlook is predominant. The educational policy of a nation is determined by its basic attitude towards life. There cannot be a sound system of education without a sound philosophy of life. If material advancement be the main objective of a nation, economic values will invariably be given priority in its educational scheme. The general trend of its system of education will be such as to impress upon the minds of the youths the necessity of wealth, rather than the necessity of virtue. *They will learn the secret of making money without caring to learn the secret of right living. They will be much more eager to be prosperous and powerful than to be truthful and honest.*

**Spiritual idealism necessary
even for temporal interests**

We have seen that, while the spiritual outlook on life tends to strengthen man's moral nature, the sensuous outlook tends to weaken it. Spiritual idealism is as necessary for temporal interests as for the eternal values. Intellectual culture does not promote human solidarity as much as the cultivation

of virtues. Mutual understanding and appreciation cannot be as strong a bond of unity among men as fellow-feeling and compassion. Moreover, intellect of a high order does not develop without moral goodness. Virtue brightens intellect and turns it into insight. Reason does not function unless the mind is free from emotional involvement. Man's rational nature depends more on his moral well-being than does his moral well-being on his rational nature. *Mere intelligence without inner purity often turns a man into a clever animal capable of exploiting the world.*

It is true that man can develop an ethical sense through intellect, independent of religion. As a rational being, he can see that his weal and woe are inter-connected with the weal and woe of his fellow-beings. None can grow in isolation. For social harmony, individual interests are to be interwoven into collective interests. If each person clamours for his own interest, regardless of the interests of others, then there will be chaos and the interest of all will suffer as a consequence. So it is to his advantage that a person makes his self-interest conformable to the common weal.

To all appearance, man can live by this ethical standard of enlightened self-interest and attain prosperity and peace in the world. But actually this cannot go very far. Enlightened self-interest is too flimsy an ethical ideal to provide a stable basis for the well-being of mankind. It is not as good as unselfishness. It does not regard selflessness as a virtue or a value in itself. Our moral life cannot be sound or mature until we practise selflessness for the sake of selflessness, until we know that our self-fulfilment is in self-effacement, in loving and serving our fellow-beings disinterestedly. This is possible only when we feel a spiritual relationship with all. No human relationship based on common secular interests can make

us disinterested in the true sense. It is the recognition of the supreme Being as the indwelling spirit in all that makes us aware of our spiritual relation with others. Some may, however, feel this relation vaguely without actual knowledge of the spiritual Reality. A few in whom this feeling becomes strong turn altruists without being avowedly spiritual. But for an all-embracing spiritual relation, disinterested love would have no meaning in human life. The egoist can find reason only for enlightened self-interest. His ethical life cannot go beyond this limit.

Religion offers solutions to modern problems

Let us see what are the specific problems of modern life and how religion solves them. Modern man wants peace with progress. He does not care for the peace of renunciation or seclusion, which is usually associated with religious life. He is acquisitive. He wants order and security in prosperity. He desires the continuity of the material progress achieved through scientific discoveries and inventions, which characterize the present age. Religion is not opposed to man's search for power, possession, or pleasure. It does not look down on the marvellous accomplishments of physical science, but wants us to remember that material values, howsoever glaring they may be, should not be rated higher than moral values. None should seek prosperity at the cost of his moral life. It defeats its own purpose, as is evident from the foregoing discussion. One can gain wealth by unfair means, but not inner light, freedom, or joy. Man's moral nature is the very basis of life's development. His physical, intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual well-being rests on this. Let man acquire wealth in abundance, in any form whatsoever, let him enjoy life in diverse ways, but let him nor deviate from

righteousness: this is the behest of religion. Assuredly, one can gain prosperity by honest ways, if one has the patience to try them.

Religion, however, does not want man to be tied down to the temporals even at their best. Its object is to lead him gradually from the search of the transitory to the search of the eternal. It recognizes the fact that man is born with inveterate sense-desires, and he has to outgrow them in a well-regulated life of experience, before he can have any longing for the super-sensible ideal Reality.

Another problem pressing on the modern man is how he can be intensely active with inner poise and peace. Shortly after my arrival in the United States, I gave a series of lectures on Vedanta in Washington, D.C. One evening, after the meeting, a lady greeted me and said, 'Swami, what we need in America is not more of religion, but the secret of inner poise and peace. If you can teach us this, you will do us a great service. We have to be relieved of nervous tension'. Evidently, the American lady did not realize how very necessary the religious spirit is for maintaining inner peace and self-possession. It did not, perhaps, occur to her that the basic cause of mental unrest and nervous disorders, common in Western life, is the sensuous outlook. Emotional disturbance is inevitable when the mind is in the grip of sense-desires. Greed, pride, anger, hatred, jealousy, lust, fear, etc. must prevail in him who is inordinately attached to mundane things. To hold to the hedonist ideal and, at the same time, remain free from emotional involvement is self-contradictory. To have poise and peace of mind one has to be interested in higher values and detached from the lower. He who holds to moral values can maintain self-possession.

Religion goes further and tells us what is pleasant is not necessarily good. The

highest Good is beyond the duality of pleasure and pain. It is the ideal Reality. When we seek that as the ultimate goal and view this life as a means to that supreme end, then we become free from worldly attachment. Consequently, we live with a dispassionate attitude and do our duties without being swayed by success and failure, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. We remain unperturbed under the varying conditions of life. We can see things objectively, because we do not count on transitory pleasures and possessions, because material values do not mean as much to us as the inner development through the passing phases of the earthly life.

A third problem besetting modern life is how man's ever-widening contact with others can be free from all discordance, all tension. A modern man has various connections with the world, social, cultural, political, economic, and so forth. He is in communication with numerous personalities. He travels fast, far and wide. From day to day, he encounters men and women of different nationalities, races, and cultural ideals. For the well-being of mankind, it is essential that his association with persons of various temperaments, castes, ideologies, customs, and manners should be harmonious and cordial. Mere tolerance, goodwill, and co-operation, without a deeper understanding of one another's position, cannot accomplish this. Not only that. There should be a genuine feeling for others, regardless of common interests. What but religion can help us adequately on this point? Religion teaches us that he who is considered an alien is but a brother in disguise, nay, our very self in another form. So in helping others we help ourselves, in hurting others we hurt ourselves. The one supreme Being is the Soul of all souls. When we recognize this truth, we establish spiritual relation with all. This is the way to

disinterested and universal love.

Spiritual unity is all-embracing. It underlies all differences. It is the unity of all unities. So spiritual vision gives us the most comprehensive view of things. We learn to look upon multiplicity as manifestation of one transcendent Reality. To live harmoniously with various cultural groups, we have to develop not only international, but universal outlook. Religion tells us that there is but one source of all power, all knowledge, all beauty, all love, and of all goodness and greatness. There is no essential difference between one expression of power and another. The difference is in the mode of manifestation. When we become aware of the essential unity underlying the diversity of forms, no manifestation, howsoever low it may appear to be, can create any adverse feeling within us. We approach it with sympathetic understanding.

The 'one world' ideal

The problem of problems of the modern man is how to make 'one world', how to integrate the world politically, economically, socially, and culturally, so that there will be no conflict of interests anywhere, that the nationals of various countries will feel as world-citizens, and mankind will be like one family. The demand for human solidarity has been all the more insistent because of the physical unification of the world by such advanced methods of transportation and communication as intercontinental airways, radio, telephone, cable, and so forth. As a matter of fact, though the distant parts of the world have been closely knit together, human hearts have not come correspondingly nearer. However, there is a growing desire in man for a better relation with his fellow-beings. The formation of the United Nations, a world organization for peace and security, is a symbol of men's

willingness to live harmoniously. Persistent efforts of the U.N. to remove the causes of friction in the international field have lessened the chance of war. It can succeed in localizing war, even though it may not be able to prevent it. By international laws, agreements, and coordinated actions, it may be able to bring about a complete political and economic adjustment throughout the world. By promoting mutual understanding and appreciation of various cultural groups, it can establish a close relation among them. But it is to be noted that the successful operation of the U.N. and its organs depends, in the last resort, not on the political sagacity or the practical efficiency of the member nations, but on their sincerity and fellow-feeling.

According to some men of light and leading, cultural relationship is the sound basis of world unity. The meeting of the Eastern and the Western races can be very well effected by mutual understanding and appreciation of their cultural patterns. As far as we can see, cultural affinity must be deeper than political or economic accord; yet it cannot be a universal meeting ground for humanity. The nations of the world at any time must be more or less advanced culturally. All cannot be at the same level of development. Even now, in this age of progress, there are many backward and primitive races. So the relationship is likely to be confined within groups of nations of the same cultural status. Spiritual unity, which transcends all worldly distinction, cultural or otherwise, is the sole universal ground of human relationship. In their deepest spiritual nature, there is no difference between man and man, though far apart they may appear to be in every other way, physically, intellectually, culturally, socially, and so forth.

The eternal role of religion

To sum up, religion has a twofold function: to transform human personalities and to transform human relationship. This can be regarded as its eternal role. Its operation varies, of course, under the changing conditions of human history. Religion is more concerned with man's inner nature than his external affairs. It adheres to the simple truth that there cannot be a better world without better men and women. It makes man aware of his real self, ever pure, free, immortal, and divine. This arouses in him self-faith, which is the key to inner unfoldment. The animal-man turns into god-man. Man's growing consciousness of his inner potentialities in the present age makes him particularly receptive to this teaching. Being aware of the spiritual self as the ruler of the psycho-physical system, an individual finds himself in a position to control his body and mind and integrate his personality.

This self-awakening leads to the recognition of the spiritual self in others. So the aspirant's attitude towards his fellow-creatures changes. He finds that the mortal man is essentially immortal. Pure or impure, strong or weak, wise or unwise, though he may appear to be, the same divine principle shines within man as his innermost self. Consequently, the aspirant's heart is filled with due regard for all. He deals with each and every individual with proper esteem. He even tries to see God as the indwelling spirit in all and to worship Him by serving man. Thus, by teaching man to see God in himself and to see God in others, religion transforms human personality, improves inter-personal relation, and paves the way for universal love. 'Let us be divine and help others to be divine. 'Be and make', let this be your motto', says Swami Vivekananda. ■

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