

Sri Ramakrishna, Modern Spirit, and Religion

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Amongst the students of religion who are acquainted with the life of Sri Ramakrishna, perhaps only a few regard his life in all its phases as historically true. To these few, what appears to the rest as belonging to the class of legend and mythology becomes living spiritual truth. To them even the lives of Krishna, Buddha, or Christ which seem lost in the mist of myth and legend become true and living in the light of the life of Ramakrishna. But apart from these few, however, to most people who have drunk deep of the modern spirit, who refuse to accept anything as true which is beyond the realm of their personal discoveries and thus are circumscribed by their own limitations, much that is told of Sri Ramakrishna's life appears as legendary, and his supernormal experiences as fantastic, or, at best, the hallucinations of a disordered brain.

A strange fact emerges here, however, which is, that certain people, while rejecting the supernormal experiences of Ramakrishna, and regarding *samādhi* as a hallucination, are the very ones who revere and honour him as a rare soul, nay, a man-god. As an example of such admiration one may cite the name of Pandit Shivanath Shastri, a most learned man, and contemporary of Ramakrishna, who was also one of the co-founders of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. The Pandit became a regular visitor to Ramakrishna, learning at his feet, and esteeming him as one of the greatest

men alive. Yet the state of *samādhi* still remained to him an abnormality.

In this connection one may also mention Professor Max Muller, and Romain Rolland, biographers of Ramakrishna, and two of the greatest thinkers of our age. They were attracted to and admired the superior spiritual genius of the man Ramakrishna, yet viewed many of the incidents of his life as legendary, and some of his spiritual experiences as delusions, or mental aberrations.

Let us, therefore, analyse why there is this contradiction in the estimation of Ramakrishna; why he is accepted as a spiritual genius by those very people who at the same time reject some of the most important experiences of his life—experiences which made him what he was. Is it true that Sri Ramakrishna had to pass through a 'period of hallucination...whence his spirit was to rise in the fullness of joyous and harmonious power to mighty realizations for the benefit of humanity' as Romain Rolland says; or may it be that the modern man sees these contradictions in Ramakrishna's life, only because he himself is the product of an age which has failed in the understanding of, and application to life, of the true spirit of religion?

To find an adequate answer, let us examine more closely this modern age and its reactions to the standards of religion; then we shall better be able to consider whether it, rightly or wrongly, evaluates the life of this great saint.

The modern spirit

The modern spirit can be defined as utilitarian and rationalistic or scientific. The history of the last four hundred years in Europe, since the age of the renaissance, marks the attempt at progress politically, economically, socially and intellectually from the standpoint of utilitarianism. The world today, however, is rudely shaken by the confusion that it is facing in every phase of life and human activity. The basic structure upon which we built the civilization of the West seems to be hopelessly collapsing. And we ask ourselves, 'Have we progressed?' or, are we not moving in a circle within an 'endless whirl of vain appearances!'

Though many of us are aware of the failure of the utilitarian standard, and though we may admit, as we face the stark reality of events in the history of the world, that there has been no real progress, yet again, we cling in substance tenaciously to the same philosophy of utilitarianism and of progress. For the basic philosophy of the Western world is still the philosophy of flux. Life is ever changing, life is ever progressing—this is the cry of today. That there is an unchangeable reality, that there is 'one in the many,' that there is a supreme goal to be attained in life—these fundamental truths are completely ignored by the man in the street as well as by the progressive philosophers and thinkers of today. The result is that the modern man rests content with this world; to him this world is all. He knows only life on earth and goodness and happiness are limited to creature comforts. In short, earthly life is the object and sole purpose of all his struggles and actions. Even his religion is made subservient to fulfil his purpose on earth.

This last statement, of course, does not apply to Christianity in its original form. The central idea in the teachings of Christ, like

all true religions, is the evanescence of earthly life, and the transcendent reality of God, the one unchangeable Being above all the changes of life. So my remarks in this essay do not apply to those devout Christians who having realized the vanities of earthly life live in constant communion with God.

But this 'other-worldly' attitude of Christ and Christianity has been largely discarded by the West in her interpretation of the teachings of Jesus as something impractical and useless. To make Christianity practical to the modern man, it has been identified with humanitarianism and social service. The religion of the majority of the intellectuals of today is doing good to and loving one another! True, they profess faith in God, but to them such a faith is only a means to inspire mankind to live harmoniously and happily on earth. This attitude has so permeated all strata of society that it has become an accepted goal, so much so, that by now my readers will be asking themselves, what is wrong with this ideal? Should not religion inspire man to love and serve humanity?

Bear patiently with me for a moment. I am not saying that the ideal of service and love is wrong; merely the fact that religion has been identified exclusively with this conception; and with such completeness that some theologians go so far as to say that God needs our help to straighten this world and its affairs.

Thus there is no gainsaying that the religion of today may be termed humanist ethics. The other day I read how a well-known modern thinker (I am sorry to admit, he is an Indian—but a disciple of the modern West) remarked that communism as he has seen it in Russia is the true practical religion, for it does not merely believe in doing good, but it actually helps and does good to mankind. It is not that I have anything against communism, or as a matter of fact

against any form of government. It is not within my sphere to judge any system. But to identify any existing form of government with religion is going too far. And the reason for this misunderstanding is that religion has been identified with humanist ethics.

Does not modern Christianity teach adoration of God, a personal relationship with God? Certainly it does. But to what extent? Is it only 'tinged by emotion,' to borrow a phrase of Matthew Arnold? If the modern man prays at all, his prayer consists of petitions to enrich himself on earth, and he hands over to God a few thanks for allowing him to live on earth. In short, he professes faith in God, but does not care to devote himself to Him, nor does he care to understand the words of Jesus when he said: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.' In fact, if a modern man dares to love God with the intensity that Christ speaks of he will be considered a spiritual freak.

I have defined Western religion as humanist ethics. This ethical life of the majority of the intellectuals of today is, however, guided by customs and social behaviour, external to himself. Stress is laid not upon self-control, or inner check, with a view to regenerating one's own self, but upon external decorum. Truly has it been remarked by Antoine De Rivarol: 'People mean nowadays by a philosopher not the man who learns the great art of mastering his passions or adding to his insight, but the man who has cast off prejudices without acquiring virtues.'

Now the question is, do not religions teach service to mankind, love for one another? Is it not a fact that the lives of Buddha, Christ, Ramakrishna and other spiritual souls have been the inspiration in every age to deeds of love and benefit to humanity? Very true. They were the

inspirers; for who could have been drawn to such great ones if their deep love for mankind were not seen? Their very lives were sacrifices on the altar of God as humanity. Pandit Shivanath, though he denounced the *samādhi* of Ramakrishna, yet was attracted to him for his great love, his great sympathy and toleration. Romain Rolland saw how the spirit of Ramakrishna rose 'in the fullness of joyous and harmonious power to mighty realizations for the benefit of humanity.' Ramakrishna's heart indeed bitterly wept at the suffering and ignorance of mankind. The disciple Vivekananda, the torch-bearer of his Master's message, said that he did not even care for his own liberation if only he could give liberation to one individual soul. Christ died on the cross for suffering humanity. Buddha denied himself the throne of a mighty kingdom that he could bring eternal life to mankind. Indeed the lives of spiritual men and women bring immense blessings to all.

What kind of benefit?

But the question still remains, what kind of benefit and blessings do these great ones bring? Are they philanthropists, and are their lives devoted to social, political and economic regeneration? In short, are they interested in our world and its affairs? The modern man will undoubtedly see in a Christ, a Buddha, or a Ramakrishna a lover of humanity, and a philanthropist, and thus appreciate these spiritual giants. *But such appreciation is misinterpretation.* This may appear to many a very strange and rather bold statement. Nevertheless the fact remains that all spiritual souls know that this world is a vanishing dream. They know that they are 'not of this world.' Thus they are interested neither in the world nor straightening its affairs. But what they are concerned about is you and me and every individual. Not to do us any earthly

good, not to give us the taste of life that ends in death, not to give us happiness that lasts for a moment; but their concern is to lead us to that life which is eternal, to that joy which knows no sorrow, to that knowledge which brings liberation. They give their life-blood for humanity that man may wake up from his dream of ignorance of an earthly life and be born in the life in spirit. Therefore, such spiritual souls are by no means humanists in the sense of those who believe that 'this world is all and we must rest content with it'.

In the words of Swami Vivekananda the world is like a 'dog's curly tail.' You straighten it and it curls again; which does not mean that we are to be indifferent to the world's sufferings any more than these great ones were indifferent.

As they were not humanists in the accepted sense, what may we ask is their attitude to this problem? Vivekananda taught man to serve man as *God*. To quote the words of Christ: 'For inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' This teaching of Christ is often quoted to inspire people to philanthropy and humanitarian works. Emphasis is laid upon doing and not upon the attitude with which we do. And that makes a world of difference. 'Ye have done it unto *me*'—thus Christ taught us to worship God in suffering humanity. The object, the ideal is to worship God, to serve Him. The building of hospitals and schools, and feeding the poor are but means to that end. The modern man takes up the means as an end; the ideal is completely forgotten. Sri Ramakrishna once said to a rich disciple of his, who was bent upon philanthropy: 'If you see God, would you ask Him to build hospitals and schools?' About Vidyasagar, who was well-known for his humanitarian work and was literally regarded as 'the ocean of kindness,' Sri Ramakrishna remarked: 'That man does not know that he

has the jewel within himself. When he knows it, his work in the outside world will drop away from him.'

In this connection it would be interesting to pass a few remarks on the philanthropic and social service that the Ramakrishna Mission is doing in India and which the intelligentsia and visitors to India speak of highly. They recognize and praise our work as a great philanthropic deed. The monks of the Ramakrishna Order are regarded by many, who do not know our inner attitude, as great humanitarians. But the fact is, none of the monks of the Ramakrishna Order regards himself as a humanitarian. His one ideal in life is to know God, and he knows that worship and meditation are the means to that end. When he is engaged in the service of man he knows he is worshipping God. This brings to my memory a very interesting incident which throws light on the subject. A young disciple of Swami Vivekananda, being inspired by the ideals of renunciation and service, devoted himself to the nursing of the sick and helping of the poor. From a very humble beginning his work grew into a huge organization. The disciple was the head of the institution for many years, which is one of the largest homes of service in India under the Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Brahmananda, an immediate disciple of Ramakrishna, and who was the leader of the Ramakrishna Mission at that time, kept watch over the spiritual progress of all the disciples and monks of the Order. When Swami found out that to this disciple, who was the head of the home of service, work became more important, he relieved him of his duties and sent him away to practise austerities and live exclusively the life of meditation. I record this incident here to point out that the ideal of the Ramakrishna Mission has been from its inception to help man to attain God, to help him to be devoted

to God and be absorbed in His love and knowledge. Service to mankind is the worship of God, and as such is a means to that end. Therefore, serving man, let us not forget that this is but a form of worship.

Brotherly love

Now let me ask those who preach brotherly love and forget to love God with all their heart, soul and mind, why is it that in spite of this teaching of love for mankind and service to humanity, when it actually comes to living, it does not work? How is it that though one may sincerely wish to love the world, the reaction is the complete opposite, despite one's will to the contrary? And man finds, by his contact with people, that the ideal of universal love is not practical. Yet as he looks at the lives of Christ or Buddha or Ramakrishna he finds that they had this love in their hearts and to them it was practical. To take an illustration from the life of Sri Ramakrishna: There were times in his life when he would feel that treading the grass, the very grass itself would be hurt; for he saw everywhere the one life, his own Self. One time a boatman was severely beaten by a cruel person and Ramakrishna cried out: 'Oh! how painful!' and the disciples saw marks of the beating on Ramakrishna's person. Can we feel such unity? Can we feel for humanity that way? We admire this love, we want to imitate such lives; but in practice we fail. And why?

Today the philosopher and the man in the street talk about unity and expansion; and they try to reach this unity by expanding themselves, as it were, into space. But they fail. To attain unity with all beings and to love humanity, two things are needed which the modern man and thinker lack. The first is the check of inner passion, or self-control; and the second is the art of diving deep within one's own soul; in other words, the following of the first commandment of

Christ, which is to love God with all one's soul, heart and mind. Shun ego or selfishness and learn to dive deep within yourself, for the Kingdom of God is within your own soul; then you find that it is the same God dwelling in the hearts of all. Universal love is thus attained, for 'in that realization,' to quote the words of the Upanishads, 'you know that, the one Self has become all.' (*Yashmin sarvāni bhūtāni Atmaibabhut vijānatah.*) 'Love thy neighbour as thyself,' because thy neighbour is thine own Self. Know this Self.

Herein lies the cause of man's confusion. Emerson hit the nail on the head when he said:

'There are two laws discrete
Not reconciled—
Law for man, and law for thing;
The last builds town and fleet,
But it runs wild,
And doth the man unking.'

The superficial humanists of today who regard this world as important, and earthly pursuits as paramount, by seeing man merely as a physical and mental being, know only of the 'law for things' and are ignorant of the 'law for man.' For they ignore the truth that there lies in man something more real, something greater than is apparent in his everyday consciousness; they forget that there is the Self in man, the Spiritual presence, which is the source of life, thought and consciousness. And thus in the phraseology of Emerson they 'un-king the man.'

No supreme purpose

Because of the ignorance of the Spiritual presence in man, the moderns have no supreme purpose, no ideal or goal in life. And as such life to them has become meaningless, and meaningless it will remain so long as they take the physical self as the real man and earthly pursuits as the be all and end all of life. The hunger for the eternal, the immortal

longings have thus been stilled by them. True it is that preachers of religions ask man to look forward to eternity in the midst of his earthly pursuits, but this looking forward is an expectation to achieve the Kingdom of God after he has lived his allotted time on earth. Though they may quote every day the teachings of Christ that the 'Kingdom of God is within' and 'is come nigh unto you,' many do not believe that it can be attained while living on earth. The result is that the 'Kingdom of heaven' has begun to be looked upon as a grandma's story.

To understand the true spirit of any religion and to appreciate the greatness of teachers like Christ, Buddha, or Ramakrishna, there is one thing most important which we must know and recognize and which unfortunately the modern thinker, as I have just mentioned, does not know and believe; and it is just this: that there is a supreme purpose, a supreme goal, which can be achieved in life, 'having attained which no other acquisition seems of any value' (*Gītā*). The immortal longing of mankind is expressed in the prayer of the Upanishads: 'Lead us from the unreal to the real; lead us from the darkness to light; lead us from death to immortality.' The immortal longing of humanity is to attain the 'eternal amongst the non-eternals of life, the abiding, infinite joy in the midst of the fleeting pleasures of life' (Upanishads). And we must know that this longing can really be satisfied on earth. The greatness of a spiritual soul lies in the fact that he has achieved this reality. The central theme of all true religions, and of all philosophy of life, in one Sanskrit word, is *jivanmukti*, which can be interpreted as liberation in life, tasting the bliss of Brahman, or attaining the Kingdom of God. Liberation from the bondages of life, the Kingdom of God, is not a far-off ideal which may or may not be

realized after death, but it is perfection to be attained on this earth, while living in the body, moving and acting apparently like all ordinary human beings. 'On this earth, the mortal becomes immortal,' says the *Katha Upanishad*. In the words of Christ: 'But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him . . . shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.' Buddha says: 'Verily I say unto thee, the Tathagata lives in the pure land of eternal bliss even now while he is still in the body.' Shankara, in his commentary on the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* writes: 'One attains Brahman; and he attains It here on earth and not after death of the body.' (*Ihaiva Brahmaiva san Brahma apyeti na sharira patat uttarakālam.*)

Is it then any wonder that man should worship Christ, Buddha, or Ramakrishna as embodiments of Godhead who not only had attained this liberation in life and entered the Kingdom of God but could give that liberation to others by their touch? In our modern times we have witnessed the lives of the disciples of Ramakrishna who, as they came to the Master, testified how their bonds of ignorance were severed and how they were illumined by his grace, by a mere touch.

All true religions and all spiritual teachers worth the name are emphatic in pointing out that the one and only purpose of human life and existence is to attain *moksha* or liberation, which is the same as perfection and which is attained by entering the Kingdom of God within. 'Be ye perfect,' says Christ. 'You are complete in Godhead,' comments St. Paul.

All spiritual wisdom in the world tells man that he can consciously unite himself with the divine while living in this body and thus may attain perfection. For in each man is God concealed. Purity, freedom,

illumination, peace, perfection are all identical with the immortal Self which only remains to be uncovered. 'As people ignorant of a golden treasure that has been hidden underground may walk over it again and again and yet never find it, so all beings, though every moment living in Brahman, never find him, for He is hidden by a covering of ignorance. . . . Brahman is the Self within, untouched by any deed, ageless, and deathless, free from grief, free from hunger and thirst. The etheric centre within the heart, where dwells Brahman, is like a boundary which separates That from the mundane world. Day and night do not cross that boundary, nor old age, nor death; neither grief, nor pleasure, nor good deeds, nor evil deeds reach That. All evil shuns That, because That is free and can never be touched by any impurity.' (*Chāndogya Upanishad*)

St. Augustine wrote: 'I, Lord, went wandering like a strayed sheep, seeking thee with anxious reasoning without, whilst thou wast within me. . . . I went round the streets and squares of the city of this world seeking thee, and found thee not, because in vain I sought without for him who was within myself.'

To seek for the perfection in Godhead, to seek for the truth that gives us freedom, is to seek for our true Self. Religion is not anything extraneous to ourselves that we have to acquire, neither is it something which we may or may not believe, but it is something living in the soul of each man. And as no man can jump out of himself, so no man can free himself from this living religion. Only it remains hidden in most men and it awaits their finding. Mother Nature, however, is patient and she gradually leads each man by the hand to awaken in him ultimately that which is his birthright. Man may incarnate again and again until he has learned his

lesson and is awakened to the worth, the golden treasure, the Kingdom of God which lies within the depths of his own soul.

The man who loves and worships God as separate from himself really gives devotion to Him who is the Self within. The followers of the path of Love worship God as Father, Mother, Friend, or Beloved. All Hindu worshippers know, however, that God whom they love and worship dwells within the Shrine of their own hearts. They call him *dehabhritam ātmā*—the Self hidden within the body. St. Augustine was aware of it as also are other true Christian devotees. What is this Self which is identical with Brahman? A distinction should be made between the apparent, phenomenal self, and the real Self, which is divine. The *Katha Upanishad* which I quote here clearly explains the philosophy of Self:

'Both the individual self and the universal Self, the Ātman, have entered the cave of the heart, the supreme abode of the Most High. Of these the former enjoys the pleasures within the realm of the body. The knower of Brahman, together with the householders who observe the fire sacrifices, sees a difference between them as between the darkness and the light.

'Of the two selves—the illusory or individual self, of which all are aware, and the real Self, which few know—it is an unchangeable being that the real Self is first recognized. He who has recognized it as unchangeable being—to him will he revealed its innermost nature.

'That which is awake in us even while we are asleep, shaping (in dream) many objects of desire, That indeed is pure, That is Brahman, and That verily is called Immortal. All the worlds have their beings in That and none can transcend That. That is the Immortal Self.

(Continued to page 16)