

have such a form is not a degradation to the Deity, for, a matter of fact infinite Beauty is a fitting and natural dimension of the Supreme. It is just its glory of self-manifestation. The varied realities of the mundane world, sentient and insentient, are infinitesimal points of this absolute beauty. This reality of the transcendent Divine form, at once perceptible to human consciousness and having the potency to lift the meditating aspirant to the ultimate vision and blessedness is asserted in all the works of Ramanuja. What Arjuna beheld on the battlefield was no benevolent hallucination but an authentic revelation of the all-inclusive Almighty.

There are four smaller works of Ramanuja, which have weight of significance out of all proportion to their size. They are **Srirangagadya**, **Sarangati-gadya**, **Vaikuntha-gadya** and **Nityagrantha**. In them Ramanuja seems to

be prescribing the manner of serious, deliberate and intensive meditations in the three parts of the day, dawn, midday and night, corresponding to the Pancharatra divisions of worship into Abhigamana, Ijya, and Yoga. The earliest meditative worship named Abhigamana, the first approach to God is said to be represented by the brief **Sri Ranganagadya**. The mid-day worship is described and conducted in the **Nitya** and **Saranagati-gadya**, wherein the act of worship and the mental element of loving meditation are indistinguishably mingled. The night worship, predominantly of the nature of inner visualisation is brought out in **Vaikuntha-gadya**. It appears in all of them that outer worship is dominated by appropriate meditation and the inner meditation is almost a mental enactment of ideal worship.

(To be continued)

RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD : A SYNTHETIC VIEW

SWAMI HARSHANANDA

[Religion, from the Latin *religare* means 'binding back' — binding the individual soul back to the Divine from whom it has come. About the natures of the individual and of the Divine and their mutual relationship, views differ among the various religions that are extant today. But there are certain basic notions and codes of conduct that are common to all the faiths. And as Sri Ramakrishna stresses, votaries of all persuasions can meet on this common broad platform and as comrades in arms wend their way to the one Ultimate Goal, call it what you will.]

Has religion done more harm than good? Quite a few intelligent people seem to think so. What with the Crusades and Jehads, communal riots and caste conflicts, superstitions and ignorance, it is reasonable to assume that religion has immensely harmed mankind and blocked its progress.

Is this really true? Is it not, rather, (as Colton says) because men have wrangled for religion, written for it, fought for it and died for it, without actually living for it? How can anyone who lives religion in his life—religion which teaches that all creatures are children of the same Father in Heaven and

hence should love one another like brothers and sisters—be a party to such conflicts or bloodshed? It is the misunderstanding and mis-application of religion that has been responsible for all the crimes perpetrated in its name. On the other hand, it has contributed towards mutual love, harmony, peace and blessedness, whenever it has been understood rightly and practised sincerely.

There is a funny story of an atheist who denied God and soul throughout his life, praying thus at the last moment: 'O God, if there is a God, save my soul if there is a soul.' This poignantly reveals that religion is a psychological necessity for man.

Vivekananda says that religion is *anubhuti*, realization. It is only God-experience, or realizing one's spiritual dimensions in full measure, that can be truly called 'Religion', with a capital R. The various paths to perfection, roads to realization, are called religions (with a smaller *r*) only in a secondary sense. They are like the various radii connecting the different points on the circumference of a circle to the centre.

But then, why do these various religions like Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity and Islam speak in different tongues, often in apparently contradictory terms and expressions? Has this not, naturally, led to conflicts in the name of religion? This is because they are trying to express the inexpressible even as a dumb man enjoying a sweet struggles to express his experience! Words having been created to express only the experience got through the five sense-organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin), naturally fail to express the spiritual experience which transcends all senses. At the spiritual level, there is experience which does not admit of verbal expression.

However, the prophets, saints, sages and seers who were men of God, could not control themselves from expressing and sharing their experiences with mankind since they were moved by boundless compassion for its sorrow and suffering. While thus struggling to express the inexpressible, they were obliged to use the language and imagery, similes and examples current in their contemporary society, through which alone their teachings could be comprehended. It is these that are actually responsible for all the apparent differences among the various religions. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it in his own inimitable way, it is the same rain water that is being discharged through the various spouts fixed near the roof of the buildings though these spouts may have different shapes and sizes. Children think these waters are different, but not grown up people.

Various religions prevailing in different parts of the world now can be broadly divided into three groups: Aryan, Semetic and Sino-Japanese. Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Sikhism belong to the first group. Judaism, Christianity and Islam belong to the second group. Taoism, Confucianism and Shintoism belong to the third group.

Even a cursory glance at these various religions is enough to show that—with the exception of Hinduism—there are several common features among them. Every one of these religions has a founder, a book and a church.

The founders are seen to be extraordinary men experiencing exalted spiritual states. In these states they received the message from on High. Spreading it became the mission of their life. They did it with great zeal and exhibited rare organizing capacity in the process. More often than not, it is a reformation of the faith in which they were born and brought up and rarely did they claim to establish an entirely new one. They often encountered fierce opposition which even made some of them martyrs in the cause of religion.

The Book of religion contains words of revelation, comprising eternal spiritual truths and moral values. Mythological stories with a view to expounding these spiritual truths, details of sacraments and initiation into the faith may also find a place. Rules of social conduct, even laws to regulate society in all its aspects including crime and punishment, also find a place in the Book.

Then comes the Church, centred on the founder and comprising his chief disciples. A set of dogmas is evolved in which every member of the religious group is bound to believe. Details of the rituals and sacraments are worked out. The church leaders endeavour to model their society according to their Book and in the process get a firm

hold over all aspects of the religious and social life of the community. Places of worship come within their control.

As already pointed out, Hinduism is the solitary exception to this pattern. Being a very ancient religion its origin is buried in the womb of time. There has been a galaxy of avataras, prophets, saints, sages and seers from time immemorial and each one of them has contributed to the enrichment or reformation of this ancient faith, rightly called 'Sanatana Dharma.' Though the Vedas have been projected as the chief or basic scriptures, a host of other religious works like the epics, agamas, dharma-sastras, puranas and even religious compendiums by various scholarly authors have gained currency, importance and authority. As regards the Church, every cult or group has its own Mathadhipati or Acharya who regulates the religious and social life of the group. For all practical purposes we can consider Hinduism more as a confederation of religions than as a single religion, in the sense in which other world religions are normally understood.

Some of the topics commonly dealt with in all these religions may now be summarised briefly. With the exception of Jainism and Buddhism, almost all the religions accept God as the Creator, sustainer and ruler of the world. He is all-knowing and all-powerful. Nothing happens without His will. He is the supreme dispenser of justice, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked. However He is all-merciful too, and hence, is eager to help the struggling souls to avoid the path of temptation and tread the path of truth and light. Some religions conceive of Him as a Person with a definite form (as in some aspects of Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism as also some schools of Christianity), some as a Personality without any particular form (as in Judaism, Islam, Sikhism and some schools of Christianity) or just as a Power (*vide* Brahman of Hinduism, and Tao of Taoism). All these religions

concede the possibility of God-experience or God-vision, which again, is possible only by His grace. This experience will make a man whole.

Next comes man. He is considered as the best of the creations of God, since God created him in His own image. This is the view of the Semitic religions. Hinduism considers him as the Atman, the uncreated spirit, identical with or similar to God in His highest state of manifestation. However, all are agreed that at the ordinary level of creation, while living in this world, man is a mixture of good and evil, capable of either. He has enough opportunities to make or mar himself. He is the maker of his own destiny. He has a fairly free will. While the Semitic religions give him only one chance for progress, the Aryan religions posit the theory of Karma and reincarnation, which afford him innumerable opportunities for achieving spiritual perfection.

What is the purpose of human life? This is another important question discussed in these religions. Whether it is going back to God and living eternally with Him in Heaven, or getting liberated from all shackles of psycho-physical organisms which are at the root of all misery and suffering, or rooting out of the little ego, or being re-established in one's own eternal blissful nature, one thing definitely agreed upon by all is this: Man must transcend all human limitations and rise to glorious divine heights! This is the goal of life.

When a goal is set forth before humanity, the path that leads to it must needs be prescribed. It is here that we find remarkable unity and even uniformity among the various religions. Right living, right speech and right thinking—these are the *sine qua non* of religious and spiritual life. Since it is the pure in heart that shall see God, purity of heart is a basic virtue that everyone must acquire. Since God is Truth, speaking the

truth is a fundamental discipline insisted upon by all. All living beings, being sparks from the Divine, should be treated with love, sympathy and compassion. All negative feelings like lust and greed, anger, jealousy and hatred, pride and prejudice which take man away from the path of God, should be eschewed. Earning one's bread by the sweat of one's honest labour and living a harmonious life with the other members of society is equally important. It is part and parcel of religious life which again is part and parcel of life itself and hence cannot be compartmentalised.

Rivers of the world, though they originate in different parts of the globe, ultimately join the same ocean. Again, it is the waters of the same ocean that feed these rivers. Similarly, all religions come from the same divine source viz., God, and when followed sincerely and diligently, will lead mankind back to Him. Once this basic truth is recognised and followed in practice, mankind will cease to quarrel in the name of religion. On the other hand, wide avenues of peace and progress will open up before mankind beckoning it to follow. Will it respond? This is the million dollar question!

KIDDIES' CORNER

GLIMPSES OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S RENUNCIATION

GIRISH PARIKH AND SHARMILA PARIKH

[In the issue for February 1982 of the Vedanta Kesari you would have enjoyed the one-act pageant on the Eternal Child of Kamarpukur. In this issue the Parikhs present you another splendid facet of Sri Ramakrishna's personality — his renunciation. "Through renunciation is immortality achieved" - says the Upanishads and Sri Ramakrishna's unique life exemplifies what marvels renunciation can accomplish.]

Characters

NARRATOR

HOLY MOTHER

SRI RAMAKRISHNA

MOTHER OF THE UNIVERSE

LAKSHMINARAYANA

NARENDRA

(Lights on stage. Sri Ramakrishna enters with some coins in one hand and a lump of earth in the other hand, repeating: "Money is earth, earth is money". He looks at the coins, rattles them in his hand, then looks at earth and repeats that sentence. He then mixes them and says: "Let me throw this away in the Holy Ganges", and exit.)

(Holy Mother enters)

Holy mother: Men are forgetful of God. And hence, whenever occasion demands, He comes down now and then to show the way to the world by following it Himself. This time He showed renunciation.

(Exits)

Narrator: By His grace we'll present some glimpses of that great renunciation. Indeed his whole life was a great manifestation of renunciation. Right from the birth when he was covered with ashes—a symbol of renunciation—

Narrator: How great was Sri Ramakrishna's renunciation, the Holy Mother once said to a devotee.