

Synthesis of Science, Religion and Spirituality

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(Science without religion is blind and religion without science is lame. The two have to be harmoniously blended, even as in the figure of Ardha-nariswara, Sakti and Siva become inseparable. This may be called true spirituality or in Sri Ramakrishna's phrase 'Vijnana', or in Swamiji's terminology 'Practical Vedanta'. Swami Harshananda of the Ramakrishna Institute of Moral and Spiritual Education, Mysore, analyses in this article the range and reach of science and religion, and the need to synthesize the two if we are to survive in this nuclear age.)

Introduction

TODAY'S world has come to the threshold of an explosion in science and technology. During the last five decades it has advanced at such a terrific pace that all the progress of the previous five millennia put together pales into insignificance before [this. The explosion is threatening to develop into a veritable volcano as has already been amply proved by the two world wars, the third, perhaps, peeping round the corner.

Curiously enough, there has been an explosion in the field of religion too, if the plethora of new cults and sects along with the revival and reform movements of the old religions is any cue to the same. Strange as it may look, it is yet a fact that religions—or rather, many religious leaders—are trying to 'prove' the facts of religion *via* the discoveries of science. Whether this wooing of science by religion has succeeded in coaxing the former to accord respectability to the latter or not, is a moot point. However, it is an undeniable fact that instead of religion providing a meaningful direction to science, it has put itself into the unenviable position of defence!

Science is necessarily concerned with the objective truth since its definition of truth involves verifiability by an observing subject. Religion as spiritual quest, on the other hand,

is devoted to the discovery of the 'highest Truth' which includes and transcends the object as well as the subject. Proof for the truths of science depends on the experience obtained through our sense organs, whereas the proof for the Truth of religion is got through the inner mystic experience attained by a purified and disciplined mind, the process of which is learnt through the scriptures or the revealed body of knowledge. Thus, science and religion have two distinct fields of activity and so, the one need not conflict with the other. However, in actual practice, conflict is very much in evidence.

To be sure, the world needs science. To be sure, again, the world needs religion too. Hence, for the sure progress of mankind, both science and religion must cooperate and coordinate their efforts.

Is this ever possible? Is it ever conceivable to bring together light and darkness and hope to produce a charming mystic twilight? Yes, if it is first conceded that they are complementary disciplines and not contradictory. It is not only possible, but is highly desirable, not only highly desirable, but is extremely urgent. It is the partial and imperfect understanding of each by its respective votaries that has resulted in an unhealthy competition and self-destructive conflict bringing mankind to the brink of total annihilation.

Science and Scientific Attitude

Derived from the root 'scire' (to know), 'science' signifies knowledge and enlightenment as opposed to nescience, ignorance and superstition. In a more restricted and technical sense, it stands for any organized body of knowledge based on observable facts and gained by a systematic study. It is no doubt a pursuit of truth, concerning itself mainly with the world outside and trying to understand what it is and how it works. Of course, in this adventure after truth, it is often confronted with the eternal question 'Why?' for which it often fails to get a satisfactory answer.

Science goes about this business by collecting information about observable facts through experiments and observations, classifying them in some known order and drawing inferences through logic and reasoning based on them. Tentative conclusions called 'hypotheses', are drawn and further experiments conducted to confirm the same. Once these hypotheses are proved beyond all doubt, through controlled and repeatable experiments, they are enunciated as 'theories' or 'laws'. However, while forming any judgement, it is imperative that it be unbiased by the personality factors of the scientist. This is rightly termed the 'scientific attitude'. Only the person endowed with such an attitude is a true scientist. He is ever ready to change his theories when new facts and deeper investigations lead to different conclusions. This is how science has grown enormously and gained respect.

Applied science and Technology

These discoveries of science, both basic and secondary, have led to the creation of fantastic developments in another field, that of applied science and technology. Energies of nature have been harnessed and converted beyond all recognition, to subserve human ends. Modern man is so deeply involved in the products of science that it is almost impossible for him to live without them.

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Limitations of science

Notwithstanding all the blessings that science has wrought for mankind, it is a stark fact that it has brought the world to the brink of total annihilation. Of course we may concede that it is not science but the scientists that are responsible for this predicament. Where exactly have they gone wrong? They have concentrated all along exclusively on the external world, the object or the 'without', forgetting and neglecting the internal world, the subject or the 'within'. Hence they have obtained only a partial, and consequently an imperfect, view of the world. This is the limitation of science and this limitation is inherent in its objective approach. Unfortunately, the scientists have failed to recognize this limitation and are arrogating to themselves an exclusive claim to the possession of truth.

The story of the six blind men 'knowing' the elephant is an illustration very much to the point. This total lack of study of the subjective world or the world within has resulted in a lopsided development of the human personality. To be sure, a beautiful face needs a beautiful nose, which must be of the right proportion and set in the right place. Neither its total absence nor its all-encompassing presence, nor its displacement from its allotted place—suppose an ear and the nose exchange their places, how would it look?—will contribute to the beauty of the face! Even so has the human psyche been warped as a result of the relentless pursuit of the external world. This has resulted in a total neglect of values and encouraged a sensate culture. To satiate the insatiable hunger for material enjoyment, natural sources of wealth and energy are being depleted at a terrific rate. The two world wars have, in no small measure, been a consequence of this greed. Gadget-civilization is adversely affecting the normal biological and psychological capacities of man. The writing on the wall is very clear. If we refuse to read it, our civilization can be destroyed by the 'barbarians from inside.'

What the scientists can do, to reform themselves and transform the society

If this should not happen—none, including the scientists, will ever wish it to happen—the scientists should change their basic outlook. Pursuit of truth, the whole truth, should be their sole aim; and the benefits that accrue from their toils should be extended to the whole of mankind. This means that the scientists should refuse to be the handmaids of their greedy employers or selfish political and governmental leaders. Nor should they allow their discoveries to be used by one section of humanity for exploiting other sections or for disturbing the fine equilibrium that Nature has set up. Otherwise all the fruits of their efforts could be misused and even abused for selfish and destructive purposes.

But, in a highly commercialized society like ours, where Mammon has already driven out God, is it ever possible? Any scientist who dares it, will either be put behind the bars or will have to face starvation. Even if this does not happen, he will not be able to muster enough support—financial and otherwise—to carry on his work.

This is a serious impediment. There are two possible ways of overcoming it. First, the saner sections of our society including a few philanthropists should volunteer to back up such scientists. Second, the scientists themselves, should work for a few years only and save up for their future projects.

Nothing is impossible in life. Where there is a will, there is a way. Once the scientists reform themselves and pursue science in this spirit, they can transform the society. In this adventure, religion can be a very helpful companion to inspire and guide.

Religion: What it is and what it is not

Almost from the beginning, mankind has believed in the existence of God or a super-human controlling Power, a power often pic-

tured as a person or a personality, an object of reverence and worship. It is this belief that gradually gave rise to building separate places of worship for Him, as also the evolution of various kinds of rituals of worship.

At the higher levels, religion has stressed the mystic experience of God—this in fact, is the quintessence of religion—as the *summum bonum* of life, and has prescribed self-purification and self-discipline as the necessary means of achieving it. The result has been a galaxy of beings called saints, sages and seers.

However, the path of self-purification and self-discipline is difficult and invariably involves self-effacement also. The generality of mankind finds it easier to follow formal external rituals and observances than lead such interior life aimed at total transformation of the personality. This has naturally resulted in formal religion replacing religious experience, dogmas getting the better of inner convictions and the development of an organized church with its concomitant evils of fanaticism, regimentation and a 'holier than thou' attitude to exploit the believers. Intolerance and hatred of religions other than one's own are also important by-products of this neglect of true religion.

Rejuvenation of religion

The only way to rejuvenate religion is to emancipate it from the clutches of soulless formalism and redirect it towards the mystic experience of the inner Truth. This inevitably entails the stressing of self-purification and self-discipline. The details of such methods of purification and discipline could however vary from person to person.

It is also necessary to liberate religion from the grip of the centres of power and wealth, which themselves are abominable sources of exploitation.

While trying to describe the ineffable, religious mystics all over the world have left us quite a voluminous literature. A careful

study of this reveals to us that the content of such experience is always the same, though their descriptions and even the methods of discipline leading to them, vary considerably. From this we can conclude that 'Religion' (as realization of Truth, as mystic experience of God) is always *one*. If this is conceded, then we have to accept that all the 'religions' of the world are simply the various paths of discipline ultimately leading to that mystic experience, even as the various radii of a circle lead to one and the same centre. Once this basic fact is understood, even formal observances of rites and rituals can be transformed into true religious discipline.

Spirituality: the fulfilment of Religion

The practice of religious discipline, if pursued relentlessly and with devoted faith, has got to lead to the direct experience of God, the all-pervading, all-knowing Spirit. Once this Spirit, the noncorporeal essence of all corporeal beings, nay, even of insentient nature, is realized, then that experience blossoms forth in every thought, word and action, as universal love and sympathy. It is truly universal since it is based on the direct perception of the fundamental unity behind the whole creation. At the subjective level, it results in perfect inner poise unaffected by the vicissitudes of life and an experience of unalloyed joy in the inner being. This is 'spirituality', the fulfilment and acme of religion.

It is strange, but true, that man seems to have a special knack for misunderstanding and even messing up things. It is perhaps due to this that spirituality has often been mistaken for miracles, magical rites, sorcery and spiritualism. This has naturally induced unregenerate people into seeking to fulfil their vile and vulgar desires, even by harming others, through such ignoble means. Of course charlatans have quickly seized such opportunities to masquerade as 'spiritual' men and wrought immense harm to gullible people.

Synthesis, the need of the hour

By now it is clear that each one of these disciplines of science, religion and spirituality, is an honest attempt at discovering truth and that all these disciplines are potentially capable of being used for the greatest good of the greatest number. It should be possible to synthesize them intelligently so that the three disciplines will get mutually strengthened and not hindered.

While jealously guarding the 'scientific attitude' and fearlessly devoting itself to the pursuit of the truth 'without', science should cultivate a positive respect towards religion as an equally valid discipline working in a parallel field, a field concerning the 'within'. It should be tempered by the value system of religion, so that a scientist will never forget that others also are human beings like him, with similar desires and aspirations. This in turn should inspire him to mobilize his discoveries for the good of human kind and destroy the ones that might be used for destructive purposes or exploitation.

Religion on its part should shed its antipathy towards and suspicion of science. It should ruthlessly adopt the scientific attitude in its investigation into the 'within', so that all superstitions can be decrusted from its body. It is also necessary that commercialisation of institutions that derive their sustenance from religion should be rooted out. By emphasizing always the need for spiritual experience of the inner truth through self-purification, religion should aim at transforming people from the level of brutes to the level of gods. It should vigorously propagate and impart its value system to the scientists, so as to give them a new dimension in their pursuit of knowledge.

Whether we are scientists investigating the 'without' or scientists delving into the 'within', we are all pilgrims on the path of human progress. It is but meet that we cooperate and help one another so as to reach our journey's end and share the joy of fulfilment.