

RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND RADHAKRISHNAN - A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Religion is an expression of the essential and inner aspect of human beings. It is this human aspect which forms the backbone of religion. Religion calls for the acceptance of the spiritual and it is the spiritual truth. The core of religion is spirituality. Philosophy of Religion involves all the main areas of philosophy, viz. metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics and value theory, the philosophy of language, philosophy of science, law, sociology, politics, history. Rabindranath Tagore epitomizes peace and beauty in the world where the forces of racial rivalry and religious division are very strong. Tagore's vision of religion is to have a personal experience of God, to deepen faith in God and thus grow to as a religious person. He moved beyond being a mere academic and sought to engage his philosophical and religious studies in the political and social developments of the contemporary context. He has done yeoman service to Hindu philosophy and religion, and has contributed a great deal to the study of religion in general. Tagore also strongly affirms that diversity is quite true but there is a unity which is truer which we discover behind diversity. Tagore believes God, nature and self to be inseparable aspects of reality. Radhakrishnan defines philosophy of religion as religion come to an understanding of itself.

Keywords : Religion, Sociology, Hindu, Unity, Reality.

INTRODUCTION

Every human being has a unique possession, which he or she calls "his or her religion." Yet he or she does not know exactly what it means. We only know that we belong to such and such religion. We are convinced that we belong to this religion from our cradle to the grave and this conviction is in all probability not true. Human beings and animals are being moulded and are taking shape according to their deeply-implanted life-sense. Animals do not need to be aware of this life-sense. Human beings possess an extra awareness that is greater than their material sense - that is, their

personhood. It is this deep-abiding creative force which is his religion. Some people may be tempted to think that religion is an escape from the world and it does not allow them to be in touch with the pains and sufferings of the world.

India is regarded as the cradle of great religions. She unfolds a wonderful blend of races, cultures, customs, languages, religions and food habits. She is able to assimilate all the great religions and fuse them into a total Indianness. The ancient sages and seers had an idea of the divine and they were guided by this idea. Thus, they raised the country to a great spiritual height. Religion lies in the endeavour of human beings to cultivate and express those qualities which are inherent in the human nature and to have faith in themselves. These qualities are not absolutely natural in individuals and therefore, religion has a purpose.¹

Religion is a part and parcel of our life and is a unique dimension of human nature. Today's age is considered as the Age of Communication. We have seen science and technology making a mind-boggling progress. What was considered impossible about fifty years ago has become a reality today due to the progress in science and technology. All the same, even in this age, people offer sacrifices to their Gods before setting out on an important work. They break coconut in order to lay the foundation stone to build a bridge. There have been incidents where people arranged frog marriages to please the rain gods and so on. All these are indications of the superstitious attitudes of the people of our nation. Very often these attitudes are equated with religion. Religion also includes a sense of humanness in it. Religion is an expression of the essential and inner aspect of human beings. It is this human aspect which forms the backbone of religion. Religion calls for the acceptance of the spiritual and it is the "spiritual truth." The core of religion is spirituality. Our religion essentially makes us aware of the communion which is beyond the physical universe. This guides us to put faith in a spiritual order.

Philosophy of religion is the philosophical examination of the central themes and concepts involved in religious traditions. It involves all the main areas of philosophy, viz. metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics and value theory, the philosophy of language, philosophy of science, law, sociology, politics, history etc. Philosophy of religion also includes an investigation into the religious significance of historical events (e.g., the Holocaust) and general features of the cosmos (e.g. laws of nature, the emergence of conscious life, widespread testimony of religious significance, and so on). Section one offers an overview of the field and its significance, with subsequent sections covering developments in the field since the mid-twentieth century.

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Rabindranath Tagore is no ordinary person; he is a genuine manifestation of the Indian spirit in the nineteenth century. He epitomises peace and beauty in the world where the forces of racial rivalry and religious division are very strong. His vision of religion is universal in the sense that he identifies religion with love. For Tagore, religion is the hunger for unity through joy and sorrow. This hunger for unity is the spiritual substance of his religion. This desire for unity is the desire to discover the rest of the world in oneself, just as a mother discovers herself in her child.

Tagore's religion is an aspect of human spirit. It does not come from God, it is rooted in human being, and, therefore, his religion is a poet's religion. Religion, for him, is a principle of unity that binds us together. Moreover, it is our essential quality inherent in us. Religion enables us to cultivate and express these qualities in us. Thus, to realise the principle of unity is spiritual and our effort to be true to it is our religion. Religion trains our attitude and behaviour towards the infinite in its human form. Religion emerges from ultimate self-consciousness. It is to see the infinite in the finite, to find God in all things. Religion does not comprise knowledge or philosophy, truth is the essence of realising one's personality and fulfillment. Religion enables us to experience the deeper unity of all that exists, it is God. At the same, religion is not the ultimate goal but it ushers us to our perfect liberation in the universal spirit across the furthest limits of humanity itself.

Tagore does not believe in any borrowed religion. He calls his religion "a poet's religion." Religion, for him is the essence of human being. Tagore sees God behind the multiplicity which is a creative principle of unity. God cannot be grasped by reason and logic. This implies not only that the divine is imminent in creation but also that the creation itself is a manifestation of the divine. Human beings, for Tagore, are the fullest expressions of the divine. We are created in the image of God. God manifests Himself in the creation. Thus, Tagore sees a harmonious relationship among God, human being and nature. He strongly holds that the world and its particulars are real because they are an expression of the divine.

Tagore sees the beauty of this universe in the harmonious relationship in the face of diversity. Communal disharmony and religious divisions are the results of our limited vision which does not penetrate into the deeper harmonious relationship of the world, but settles for usefulness and efficiency. In order to lead a good life, we need to transcend our egoistic desire for gaining in the love of the divine and its creation. The path for realisation of the divine includes creative activity and this creative activity for Tagore was his writing, painting, composing and educating. Thus, Tagore

challenges us to discover the creative spirit within us so that we can be better religious and better people. Tagore is considered as the soul of Bengal—the real rural Bengal. One must know about Tagore in order to know Bengal. Tagore had an indomitable love for God and people. He has written many soul-inspiring, God-oriented songs and poems. At a time when hatred, divisions and narrow-mindedness have plagued our country and the world, Rabindranath Tagore stands as a symbol of peace and universal fellowship. His religious fervour and insights could be the answer to our troubled world. Tagore's vision of religion is to have a personal experience of God, to deepen faith in God and thus grow to as a religious person.

Tagore's religion is not a body of written doctrines or theological principles; rather it is something that is inseparable from one's core. He strongly admits that he cannot define it, but he says that the aim of religion is neither idle tranquility nor the enjoyment of languid beauty. Somehow his mind initially remained coldly aloof, absolutely uninfluenced by any religion whatsoever. When he was eighteen, a sudden spring breeze of religious experience for the first time came to his life and passed away leaving in his memory a direct message of spiritual reality.²

Tagore vehemently asserts that institutional religions are false and dogmatic. There is a difference between true religion and false religion. True religion is characterised by the qualities of naturality and spontaneity in it. It is free and spontaneous in an every individual. It has no boundaries around itself³.

He believes that the finite, imperfect self is real but the underlying infinite and the perfect self are much more real, hence the religion of human being is the realisation of this perfect self or the Infinite. Tagore also affirms that diversity is quite true but there is a unity which is truer which we discover behind diversity. Tagore tells the purpose of our existence, "The individual man must exist for Man the great, and must express him in disinterested works, in science and philosophy, in literature and arts, in service and worship."⁴

This is his religion which is at work in the heart of all. It finds expression in myriad forms and ways. He knows and makes use of this world where it is endless and thus attains greatness, but he realises his own truth where it is perfect and thus finds his fulfillment. It is crystal clear thus that to Tagore, religion is the breath of life. He does not put aside other things from his life. His senses are renewed in a new form that appreciates all the things that surround him.⁵

Tagore had been greatly touched by the verses of the Upanishads and the teachings of Buddha and he has used them in his life as well as in his preaching.⁹ He was born in a family which, at that time, was earnestly developing a monotheistic religion based upon the philosophy of the

Upanishads.⁶

RADHAKRISHNAN

The philosophy of Radhakrishnan is a way of understanding life and his study of Indian philosophy served as a cultural therapy. By interpreting Indian thought in western terms and showing that it was imbued with reason and logic he was able to give Indians a new sense of esteem, who were overcome by inferiority complex by imperial forces. But he also made clear to them that their long and rich tradition had been arrested and required further evolution and he exhorted Indians to cast off much that was corrupt and abhorrent. Dr. Radhakrishnan moved beyond being a mere academic and sought to engage his philosophical and religious studies in the political and social developments of the contemporary context. He earned very early international recognition as a philosopher.

Dr Radhakrishnan, religion was not about path to salvation. He says, "For me the road to salvation is through an incessant toil in the service of my country and humanity." Religion is neither about set of concrete dogmas defining its identity, as he argues that "There are some things which are more important than our particularistic allegiances: truth and humanity and that universal religious consciousness which is the common possession of all human beings by virtue of their spiritual endowment. So long as our group loyalties are strong and overriding we can't belong to the general human society". The principles defining religion should not be frozen in time and must reflect the changing society and, should be tested to reason and logic as he explains that "We call it faith simply because spiritual perception like other kinds of perception is liable to error and requires the testing process of logical thought".⁷

As a person who believed in evolution of religion according to changing times, Dr Radhakrishnan argued that there is nothing called "irreligion". Atheism is a quest for higher religion compatible with the increased knowledge. Secularism itself is a spiritual construct. He explains that "There is no state religion. All the different forms are given equal place, provided they do not lead to corrupt practices. Each one is at liberty to approach the unseen as it suits his capacity and inclination. If this is the basis of our secular state, to be secular is not to be religiously illiterate. It is to be deeply spiritual and not narrowly religious".

The importance of religion as a social institution can be realised easily today. Our rivers were much safer and cleaner when they were worshipped as goddesses than by all the environmental laws put together. The belief in humanity and common good can protect human beings better than draconian laws. It is this power of religion as a social institution, tested to logic and adapted to changing times that Dr Radhakrishnan wanted us to believe in. However, he also warned about the fragile foundation of this institution. The fissures created by fundamentalists restricting the religion to mere symbols and dogmas,

the fear and suspicion spread by the “liberals” that religion in public space is all about imposing one’s culture onto another destroyed this institution irrevocably.

Dr Radhakrishnan believed that religion and science can not only coexist but one is incomplete without the other. Acquiring knowledge immensely involves in devotion/discipline (Bhakti) and Faith (Shraddha). It must be complimented by other processes like Hearing/Listening (Shravana), Reflection (Manana) and Contemplation (Nididdhyasana). As Dr.Paitoon Patyaiyng explains Dr Radhakrishnan’s reasoning, “one who hears he understands up to a point. But when he reflects on what he hears, he adds faith to a knowledge which increases faith. There is great insistence on the need for logical inquiry. Without it faith will degenerate into credulity. However, without the material supplied by faith, logical reasoning may turn into mere speculation”.⁸

He has done yeoman service to Hindu philosophy and religion, and has contributed a great deal to the study of religion in general. Among his early works are two volumes on Indian philosophy, and his latest writing is *The Brahma Sutra--The Philosophy of Spiritual Life* (Harper 1960). His interpretations and criticisms of both Western and Hindu thought are fresh, distinctive and stimulating. His contributions to social philosophy, to modern religion and mysticism, his influence on contemporary Hinduism put his place at the zenith in 20th Century philosophy.

COMPARISON

Rabindranath Tagore

Tagore envisages some special characteristics of religions. Religion requires a reference to the beyond. Human beings are not satisfied with being confined to the present but they have a capacity of going beyond themselves towards higher regions. The inherent truth within human beings drives them beyond themselves. Consciously or unconsciously we have in our life this feeling of the Truth which is ever larger than its appearance, for our life is facing the Infinite, and it is in movement. Its aspiration is therefore infinitely more than its achievement, and as it goes on it finds that no realisation of truth ever leaves it stranded on the desert of finality, but carries it to a region beyond.⁹

Tagore is reluctant to speak about his view of religion. He does not accept any borrowed religion, but what he accepts is his own religion which he reaches through some unseen and trackless channels.¹⁰

Religion for Tagore must be free from all constraints. It must allow people to grow and

develop. Poetry is Tagore's religion because it gives free play to his spirit. He has communication with God through Nature. Tagore's poetry embodies his joy, his delight which he experiences in such communion with the reality.

Tagore's conception of religion springs from his conception of reality. He believes that the finite, imperfect self is real but the underlying infinite and the perfect self are much more real, hence the religion of human being is the realisation of this perfect self or the Infinite. Tagore also strongly affirms that diversity is quite true but there is a unity which is truer which we discover behind diversity. Tagore believes God, nature and self to be inseparable aspects of reality. They are essentially the same. He says, "If this universe is not the manifestation of a person, then it is a stupendous deception and perpetual insult to him."¹¹ Hence, for Tagore, the world is not unreal or maya. It is as real as Reality because it is the manifestation of Reality.

Tagore sees the beauty of this universe in the harmonious relationship in the face of diversity. Communal disharmony and religious divisions are the results of our limited vision which does not penetrate into the harmonious relationship of the world, but settles for usefulness and efficiency. In order to lead a good life, we need to transcend our egoistic desire for gain in the love of the divine and its creation. The path to realisation of the divine includes creative activity and this creative activity for Tagore was his writing, painting, composing and educating. Thus, Tagore challenges us to discover the creative spirit within us so that we can be better religious and better people. Tagore sees that the goal of religion is attaining union with the Infinite. Philosophy is concerned with the knowledge of reality, and the realisation of reality is the concern of religion. Knowing reality implies an intellectual activity and its realisation he asserts in clear language:

My religion is essentially poet's religion. Its touch comes to me through the same unseen and trackless channels as does the inspiration of my music. My religious life has followed the same mysterious line of growth as has my poetical life.¹²

His poetry, religion and music—all seem to have sprung from his vision. Poetry, music and religion lead to direct encounter with the Reality. The poet is the seeker of beauty and the philosopher aims at finding truth.¹³ Prof. S. Radhakrishnan considers Tagore's philosophy not as a product of logical intellect but a "sigh of the soul rather than a reasoned account of metaphysics; an atmosphere rather than a system of philosophy."¹⁴ Tagore's religion could be the solution to the religious conflicts of our times. His conception of religion is the essence of human beings. It is in us and therefore even an atheist can be a spiritual person. Religion is

helpful in so far as it is conducive to realise our essence and largely brings out our human qualities. Therefore, it seems to imply that we can be spiritual persons even if there is no God.

Radhakrishnan

Radhakrishnan defines philosophy of religion as "religion come to an understanding of itself." Writing in the preface to *The Brahma Sutra*, he says: "Unfortunately philosophy today is detached and specialized and is not aware of the peril to the human spirit. It does not seem to realize its responsibility to the time in which it is set. Even those who have a religious allegiance do not seem to feel a religious responsibility." According to Radhakrishnan, the advantages of religion are innumerable. It guarantees values, gives meaning to life and inculcates confidence to go on adventures. Enumerating the advantages of religion, Radhakrishnan says, "Religion is the discipline which touches the conscience and helps us to struggle with evil and sordidness, saves us from greed, lust and hatred, releases moral power, and imparts courage in the enterprise of saving the world."¹⁵

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