

Mind the Kernel

Religion grew in a very early period of human history, nobody knows exactly when. But it grew everywhere, wherever there were people, much before civilization of some complexity developed on the valleys of the Tigris, the Euphrates, the Nile or the Indus. Perhaps way back in the little known stone ages, among cave dwellers, who settled to form the first society, who hunted and gathered food and other articles, but gradually invented agriculture, domesticated animals, and started making pottery, religion peeped into the minds of some who could think a little deeper than others.

The urge behind such thoughts seems to have one thing in common: speculation into the unknown, the transcendent. Some might have queried into the mystery of death; some might want to propitiate and control the Powers of Nature that appeared to them sentient and personified. Some others, it may be, at a later period, searched for a meaning of our existence. Yet, all such search was concerned with the realm of the transcendent, away from the known and the tangible. Answers to many such queries often came in the form of what we would now call superstitions.

Slowly, with the progress of civilization, with the development of more and more organized and systematic thinking, man slowly evolved more or less clear and reasoned ideas of religion, which dealt with the true nature of Nature, of man, and of their relation. These are the ancient philosophies of religion, some of which came down almost unaltered to our times.

All religions of modern man have a kernel at the centre and three layers around it. The inmost layer is philosophy, a set of organized, life-giving ideas. The ideas, however, have seldom been given to the ordinary masses in a simple form.

For the masses were the stories that grew through ages to explain philosophy. This is the mythological part of religion, the second layer, which is almost always a mixture of wisdom and superstition. Great teachers of mankind discriminated between the two and extracted the pure wisdom, leaving aside superstitions. But, unfortunately, there have also been ignorant priests and imposters, who stressed upon the trash and misled people.

Finally, the third part, the external layer, is rites and rituals. It gives the ordinary minds, unable to grasp the finer, something gross and tangible to start with. It involves a lot of symbols expressing subtle ideas. The mind of an ordinary man cannot conceive of subtle ideas without the help of such tangible things as symbols. But, we often cling to the external things and forget the ideas they are supposed to express. That does not help us become any wiser.

Since religions grew in different times and climes, they naturally have different mythologies and symbols and rituals. Those who concentrate on these external layers of religion, and not on the ideas behind them, not only defeat their very purpose, but become degraded and narrow-minded. They think their religion is the only true religion. The history of religions is full of such fanaticism and bigotry that led to horrific bloodshed.

What is the purpose of religion? Certainly not dissention, but harmony; not hate, but love; not animality, but divinity. All religions aim at raising man to true manhood, and then to divinity. This upward journey is possible only by the understanding and propagation of the right ideas they uphold and their implementation in life – mythology or no mythology, rituals or no rituals. Here is the importance of right philosophy. And here comes the *Vedānta*, which is not only a well reasoned philosophy, but the science of the inner world, of the transcendent. It declares *man himself is essentially divine and all that exists is also essentially divine*. It proclaims that we are all one. And, therefore, the only meaning of life is to live for others. That is its great practical implication. Being a science, it does not belong to any particular religious sect, does not depend on any set of beliefs, and is universal in scope. It holds in itself all shades of right thoughts of all religions that are there now and all others that are yet to come.

The right ideas and their implementation in life lead to the *kernel* of religion, which is the realization of the highest truth of Oneness: *man himself is essentially divine and all that exists is also essentially divine*. In other words, it is the expression of the immense possibilities latent in man. Religion is neither dogma, nor doctrine, nor rituals. It is not in scriptures, nor in temples. It is to be realized only in practical life, in actual thoughts and feelings in our everyday life.

Anything that takes us towards the kernel is good for us and for society. And that is true religion. It brings about positive fundamental changes in our nature, our character, and *that is the test of religion*. Love must rein in place of hate, strength in place of weakness, sacrifice in place of greed. What is more important to change the condition of society, which is nothing but an agglomeration of individuals?