

Rituals, Stories, and The Ideal

In all ages in every country the common man is inclined to mythology and rituals, the external crust of religions. The finer ideas of religions have always been sidelined except by the truly educated few. Mythology is for feeding the ordinary mind with sublime thoughts through stories, but unfortunately stories are often fraught with weakness. They often depict men as helpless weaklings who must depend on supernatural entities, who are to be appeased in every way to be benevolent and protective to us.

Swami Vivekananda asked us to develop the scientific spirit and be able to discriminate between the strengthening, life-giving ideas and the weakening ones. He knew the power of stories. He did not discard them. Only he wanted to be careful and cull the right ones for right results.

Philosophy crystallizes into mythology and then further crystallizes into rituals. Symbol worship is the mainstay of rituals. The common mind cannot grasp the subtle. It needs something gross to represent the sublime ideas. Hence arises the need for symbols. It is said that God made men after His own image. Swamiji said, 'it was also true that man made God after his own image'. That is to say, the highest idea the common man can form is the idea of the highest kind of man he can imagine and nothing more. Due to this limitation the highest ideas understood by the ordinary man are anthropomorphic or human-like. Symbol worship, therefore, easily takes the form of image worship. Image worship was the first step in the twelve year long *sāadhanā* of Sri Ramakrishna. He started where the common man would start. And he proved its efficacy. Swamiji said: 'If such Ramakrishna Paramahamsas are produced by idol-worship, what will you have – the reformer's creed or any number of idols? I want an answer. Take a thousand idols more if you can produce Ramakrishna Paramahamsas through idol-worship, and may God speed you! Produce such noble natures by any means you can.'

But rituals and image worship also have their share of negative effects, when they are based on the idea that God is separate from us as well as from nature. Except in case of true devotees, such ideas may often tend to negate the true stature of man, his Divinity, and make him believe that he is nothing but a creature in the hands of an omnipotent, omnipresent *Person* (perhaps sitting somewhere beyond the clouds!!). The common man is made to believe that he must depend on such a Person for help. He is taught to pray to Him. Swami Vivekananda's observation was: 'Wonderful is the idea of the Personal God apart from nature, whom we worship and love. Sometimes this idea is very soothing. But, says the Vedanta, the soothing is something like the effect that comes from an opiate, not natural. It brings weakness in the long run, and what this world wants today, more than it ever did before, is strength.' One may remember that Karl Marx said (whatever the context may be): Religion is the opium for the masses.

Religions grew in different times and climes, in different historical contexts. So, in spite of their common spiritual content, their outer colours and tones have been very different. Therefore, the men who are stuck up on the external aspects of religions see only the differences of religions, become sectarian and often fanatics.

While the common man cannot do without rituals, which are indeed helpful if practised in the right spirit, too much stress on them externalizes the mind. The mind becomes more and more engrossed with the unimportant, external details that were traditionally laid down. Thus rituals soon lose the vigour and spirit of spirituality. So the Buddha stood against all rituals. But within a few centuries Buddhism was full with rituals.

Actually rituals popularized Buddhism, caused its immense expansion, and also eventually weakened its spirit.

Swami Vivekananda was for giving the highest ideal in its simplest form directly to the common men, women, and children without fear. He was straight: 'You are the Pure One. Awake and arise!' That was his call. He never confused his universal message with anything else. Yet, he accepted rituals for the sake of the weaker minds, as the first steps for further growth. But he cautioned his compatriots: 'only take care that no form becomes necessary – unity in variety – see that universality be not hampered in the least. Everything must be sacrificed, if necessary, for that one sentiment, universality.'

'My ideal indeed can be put into a few words', he said, 'and that is: to preach unto mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every movement of life.' To make it easy to understand he presented us with the life of Sri Ramakrishna. And for symbol worship, he gave something new: image worship on the basis of the idea of Oneness. What is that? 'The living God is within you, and yet you are building churches and temples and believing all sorts of imaginary nonsense. The only God to worship is the human soul in the human body. Of course all animals are temples too, but man is the highest, the Taj Mahal of temples. If I cannot worship in that, no other temple will be of any advantage. The moment I have realised God sitting in the temple of every human body, the moment I stand in reverence before every human being and see God in him – that moment I am free from bondage, everything that binds vanishes, and I am free.'