

TEXT OF AN ADDRESS

RELIGION AND THE
MODERN MOOD

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It happens to be the common psychological weakness of man to fret and fume over the present and clothe the past and future with a halo of splendour. We speak of the past as the good old times and the farther back we recede, the stronger this uncanny charm on our mind grows. The hoary antiquity becomes to us something still more than "good old times." Imperceptibly we look upon it as some thin sacrosanct. What a subtle charm do we feel come upon our souls as in our imagination we turn back to the times when Adam delved and Eve span and we call that primitive state of society, the Golden Age of human history. Likewise when we look ahead, things at once assume rosy hues. We find ourselves transported beyond this dull humdrum mundane life and landed in a sort of "Promised Land" flowing with milk and honey. The millennium is always at the farthest possible end of our mental vision of the future. To my mind it is an optical illusion. Just as distance in space lends charm to the landscape, even so does distance in time exercise a subtle charm on our minds and we see things, not as they are, but as we wish them to be.

While answering the question as to the religious mood of the modern man I am not going to be swayed by this common illusion. I believe in no spells, no charms. The charm of facts is the only charm which we should submit to. In dealing with the question I will face the hard facts of the situation.

The present age is generally described as the age of irreligiosity, gross materialism and a falling off in the spiritual values of life. So far as my reading of modern mentality goes, I find no justification for such a sweeping denunciation and it seems to me that here again we are unconsciously giving way to the sort of subtle influence above described. Here again, it is the rumble of the distant drum that sounds sweet. True, in the good old past, there may have been epochs when spiritual life may have stood at a higher level in particular parts of the world. But taking humanity as a whole, I can say without a moment's hesitation that as in the sphere of physical science, even so in the moral and religious spheres, modern humanity is decidedly much ahead of the preceding generations—and this notwithstanding the fact that at no time the annals of man, except perhaps the period of the French Revolution, there was such a widespread revolt against religion.

Paradoxical as it may appear, the modern man, though professedly indifferent, even antagonistic to religion, has to my mind far more of religion in him than his predecessor for good many generations past. True, this modern civilization has evils of its own. But taking all things into consideration I am

decidedly of opinion, as I will presently discuss, that so far as religious life goes, we of the modern generation imbued with modern ideals stand on a higher level.

True Concept of Religion

The very universal spirit of revolt against conventional religion is to my mind a happy sign of the times. Those to whom religion is just a bundle of terms and trappings, forms and formulae, rites and rituals may well feel alarmed at this and raise the cry of "Religion in Danger." To those, however, with whom religion is another name for a good, clean, honest life of labour and love, the revolt marks a turning point for the better. It indicates that modern man is no longer satisfied with the puerilities and empty formalities for which hide-bound dogmatic religion stands. He is fed up with sham and wants something real. The revolt is thus an index to the inner yearning of the soul of modern man for a better life which is the essence of all true religion. This exactly was the interpretation put on the modern mood of humanity when the editor of a popular London magazine put to the leading lights of England the question why the purchases in that metropolis presented a deserted look. Jesus was nowhere to be found in the church, was the explanation of some topmost thinkers of the day. The church could not possibly have any hold on the modern mind, it was said, unless it embarked on a voyage in quest of Jesus, without whom it was a dead lifeless affair.

What was said by Christian thinkers of Christianity is true of every other religion. If Christianity is believed by some to have died with Jesus on the cross, it may at once be said that no other religion survived its founder for long in its true spirit. Speaking of the degeneration of present day Islam, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a well-known figure in India had observed :

"The wild beasts of the jungle may manage to live in peace and amity in the same den but not two Mullahs in the same mosque. With the ferocity of the beasts of the wood, they rush down on one another's throats."

So far as present-day Islam is concerned it is a sad travesty of true Islam as taught and practised by the Prophet Muhammad.

Come to another great religion and you find the same sad tale. There is much of forms and formalities but very little of the spirit which alone constitutes true religion. Certainly the great Lord Krishna could not have taught such cruelty of man to man as the caste system. The untold misery that has been inflicted on the millions of fellowmen called the untouchables in

the name of religion is unparalleled in the history of religious persecution and a standing disgrace to India. Small wonder therefore, if the modern man whom modern science has liberated from the shackles of mental slavery should rise in revolt and say: "Pray, no more of this religion!" There is no cause for alarm. It is a revolt against the counterfeit thing masquerading as religion. So far as religion in its true sense is concerned, the religion of Christ and Krishna, of Muhammad and Buddha, humanity can no more run away from it than from its own shadow. The revolt whatever form it may have taken, if read aright will be found to be inspired by one dominant passion: Down with the false.

Two Important elements of Religion

I must admit this wave of revolt, while it places more emphasis on the humanistic aspect of religion, as at the same time considerably undermined faith in God. Every religion partakes of two important elements—love of God and love of man. Love thy neighbour as thyself was not the beautiful teaching of the preacher of the Sermon on the Mount alone. Every religion, in its true sense, makes fellow-feeling the highest virtue. "No one of you is a true believer," so goes a saying of the Prophet Muhammad, "who does not wish for others what he wishes for himself." When asked "What, O Prophet, is the sum and substance of religion?" his succinct reply was: "Glorification of the Lord and love of fellow-man." When I say that there is more of religion in the modern man, I say so only with regard to the humanistic aspect of religion. The other, and perhaps the more important element of religion viz., faith in God is decidedly at the lowest possible ebb.

Growth of Humanistic Mood

Perhaps it will not be out of place to discuss at a little greater length the origin, growth and development of this humanistic mood. In days gone by mankind used to be more theistic in his outlook. Whether God liked a certain thing or not, whether it was permitted or prohibited by God—this was the main standard of human conduct. God-idea, for whatever it was worth had become a common obsession. It may not have been in the nature of enlightened faith. It may have been a mere lip-affair. But there is no doubt about the fact that God-idea loomed much larger in the mental make-up of older generations. A prominent figure among the makers of modern Turkey when asked to explain the difference between the old and the new order of things in Turkey gave an apt illustration of the change in modern outlook. "Previously", he observed, "if a Turk of a generation ago were to come across an aeroplane, his first question about the invention would be, Is it a virtue or a sin? Now the modern Turk's attitude is: Is it useful to the Republic?" God-idea held almost a monopoly of the human mind and all human conduct was judged according to the measure-stick of God. Man was regarded a mere plaything, a tool in the hand of God. This state of things naturally gave the church a tremendous authority, for was it not a

visible representative of God on earth? This mental frame received a set-back with the dawn of the age of science. The gradual conquest of physical nature by man gradually pushed the pendulum to swing back from God to man. Man delved into the hidden forces of nature, subjugated them to his will and naturally this inspired him with a sense of his own importance. So far as religion is concerned, the advance of modern science had two reactions on it. God who was so far regarded as all in all, the sole power on whom man depended for his weal or woe had to come down from that high pedestal. Man was, after all not so insignificant an entity in the scheme of things, it dawned on mankind. And as science advanced farther and farther, God-idea shrank backward and backward, making man take the place of God as the hero of the game. The other great reaction on religion was that with the dawn of rationality people refused to show implicit obedience to its dictates. They began to ask questions and subjected the doctrines and teachings of religion to the search-light of critical analysis. The result was that God-idea, church, priest, scripture—the whole institution lost its hold on the mind of man.

Shift towards Rationality

Man was now installed on the pedestal of God. He was the monarch of all he surveyed. The question no longer was whether God liked a thing or not. The measure-stick of human conduct changed. How far is it in consonance with the dictates of reason? These were now the standards of conduct that came into vogue. The good of man or utilitarianism became the predominant mood. This is how the cult known as humanism sprang up, grew and developed. *It may be observed in passing, that though avowedly anti-religious, humanism was unconsciously fulfilling one great object of religion viz., the promotion of the good of man.*

In relating this gradual evolution of the humanistic mood, I must point out, I have only the Western countries in mind. It was there that the conflict between science and religion began. The East still had the life of its traditional calm and content, caring little for the encroachment of the Westerner on physical nature, even piously shrugging shoulders at such prying into the mysteries of God. Modern sciences were tabooed as the act of the Devil and when the railway trains were first introduced, the pious folk scrupulously eschewed the touch of this diabolical invention. Everything Western was dreaded as unmixed evil, the work of the Devil. It was considered a sin to study the English language and when Sir Syed Ahmad Khan founded his College at Aligarh, the pious Maulanas of the day rose as one man against him and denounced him as a *kafir*, outside the pale of Islam. In the meantime while the East was clinging fast to God and faith, the West was advancing by leaps and bounds in the domain of physical sciences and equipping itself with power which ultimately led to the subjugation and exploitation of the East.

Coming back to the West, we observe that with the spread of the scientific light and the subjugation of the forces of nature, the centre of gravity of the human thought shifted from God to man. This was a period of mad rush for the possession of material gains and comforts, on the one hand, and of intense rational activity on the other. The church which talked more of the paradise to come and demanded unquestioning faith, could not long command the allegiance of the modern man who could not see much sense in rites and rituals, forms and formulas and with whom life was the one thing to care for. What use was the church, so far as the good of this life was concerned. In the course of its history, it had even stood in the way of scientific progress and that reputation went a long way to set in a re-action against it. The modern man had no use for it. Was he not the maker of his own destiny? Had he not subjugated the forces of nature? This gave him a mood of self-sufficiency. Nor was God of any use to man. If at all He existed, He did not interfere with man's business. When during the archaeological excavations in Egypt, heaps of mummies of cats once worshipped as deities in the hoary antiquity, were unearthed, these were put to auction and used as manure. The comment that it evoked from one London paper is illustrative of the modern mood. "The first gods," it observed, "in the history of man that have been some use to man."

This was the predominant mood of the modern man in the West, for good many decades before the Great War. Imbued with a sense of self-sufficiency, he had neither any use for God nor Church. He could very well take care of himself. Utility and rationality were the two dominant notes of the time. Patriotism came to be regarded as the highest virtue and when equipped with the newly acquired power, there was a mad rush for land grabbing. This set in a wave of nationalism whose slogan was "My country, right or wrong." Country and nationality constituted the highest concepts of morality. The Church was thrown away as a worn-out glove and there came about what is known as the secularization of the State. The spirit of sacrifice of the old Crusader who in the name of God and Church underwent untold hardships under foreign skies, court-ing death for the glory of the Cross and the redemption of the Holy Land was now evoked in the name of king and country. The whole mental make-up underwent a metamorphosis. Intoxicated with power, self-aggrandizement, national aggrandizement became the guiding principles during the pre-war period.

Then came the explosion of the Great War. The bubble of a goddess civilization burst. The very science which had been installed in place of God proved the ruination of nations. Notwithstanding his enlightenment, notwithstanding his rationality and civilization, he could not help drifting towards the inevitable crash. There was unprecedented bloodshed, misery and devastation. Man who considered himself the monarch of all he surveyed

was caught in his own trap. The conflagration of this mad fury of war which lasted for long years consumed all the old values in its universal flames. Man stood disillusioned. His spirit now rose in revolt against the old order of things and this revolt found expression in such slogans as "the world must be made safe for democracy."

Dawn of Sanity

The war was, however, not an unmixed evil. Good cometh out of evil and of this great evil, Western man emerged wiser, though sadder. There was something certainly wrong somewhere with his civilization. No civilization could long stand on the sandy foundations of self-interest. The narrow aggressive nationalism stood exposed in all its hideous nudity. Human outlook now began to expand beyond national four-walls and think in terms of inter-nationalism. The League of Nations was the product of this outlook. Furthermore, there was hardly a home in Europe which had not lost some dear soul during the War. Fond mothers could not believe that death was the end of life and that they would never meet their dear ones again. The pendulum thus once more took a swing in the direction of God and immortality. The post-war Europe was not the self-sufficient arrogant pre-war Europe. It came out much chiselled and chastened. There was a distinct yearning after some meaning of life. The pre-war standards on which he had laid so much value had crashed. There was vague groping after some true certain explanation of the meaning of life. Nor was this new spirit of quest after God anything of the nature of the Philosopher's quest. It was more mystical in character. They wanted no "proofs" of God. The yearning now was for some sort of personal experience, a personal dive into the mysteries of life. Life ceases to be worth living, the moment it gets divested of all meaning.

Tolstoy says that there was a time in his life when this life had lost all meaning to him and he would roam about in the wilderness in quest of it. This state of things weighed so heavily on his mind and grew so oppressive to his soul that, he says, he actually had to hide the rope lest in his moments of depression he should hang himself to the rafters of his room. Exactly this is the modernmost mood of the West. It must come by some certain knowledge of God or it is likely to hang itself.

What is the sum-total then, the long and short of the whole story? So far as the West is concerned, it has sowed its wild oats to its heart's content. Now like the prodigal son it is coming back towards God and religion considerably chastened. No more of this demon of self-seeking nationalism. No more of this barren rational philosophy of life! These are the sentiments that now sway, not the rank and file of course, but the vanguard of thought in the West. Whether this mood will last for long depends how far religion can meet this new yearning and quench this new

thirst. - It all depends how far religion can catch this mood by the forelock. It consists of three distinct elements. In the first place, it can accept no teachings which it cannot understand. Secondly, it can respect no religion which does not embrace the whole of humanity within its bosom, without distinction of caste, creed or colour. And thirdly—and this is a product of the Great War a mystical yearning to get at certain knowledge of God through personal experience. Religion must satisfy this yearning too. And it is in view of these tendencies of the modern mentality that we believe that the West is standing almost at the threshold of Islam which, according to us, was the religion of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha, Krishna, Confucius and Zoroaster. Muhammad was its last exponent.

Light of God is one and the same

To dwell a little more on this aspect of our faith, our view is that God is the source of all light and just as his physical light is one and the same wherever it may be, likewise His spiritual light must be one and the same too, no matter through which channel it was given to mankind—through Abraham or Moses, Jesus or Muhammad, Buddha or Krishna. We regard them all as so many channels and the difference in channels does not in the least matter. It is the light that matters and the light, we believe, was one and the same by whomsoever brought. In our veneration of these channels, the Quran emphatically enjoins us, we must make no discrimination and hold them all alike in reverence. It is our conviction that the West is hankering after a spark of this true light brought by these great Teachers.

The Present East

Strictly speaking, when we speak of the modern mood we mean the mood of the West; for it is the West that leads the van of modernity in all spheres of life and thought. Nevertheless you would expect me to complete the picture by telling you what I think of the modern mentality in the East. This I can cut short in one sentence and say that what the West was before the Great War, exactly that the East is after the war. Before the war, the East was practically nowhere. It had just but dimly awakened to the onward march of the West. The old fashioned orthodox elements put down the subjugation of the East by the West to the will of God and as devout people they considered it their duty to submit to that Providential decree without a murmur. Such Musalmans reconciled themselves to this lot by various explanations. It was a habit of God, they believed to visit those whom He chose for his favours with special trials in this worldly life. The Musalmans were such a chosen people and hence their degeneration in this struggle of life. This, they believed, would be more than compensate in the life to come when the kafirs who have all the good things of life to themselves would be roasted in hell-fire and they would be enjoying an eternal holiday in lovely gardens, flowing with

streams of milk and honey and swarming with the *Hurs*. Or again, they would lull themselves to sleep by the faith that God would send down the *Imam Mahdi* and Jesus who, they believed had been kept alive in the 4th heaven for this very purpose—God would send them both in the latter days for the deliverance of Musalmans. They would

both join hands, wage a war against all non-Muslims and make Islam triumph all over the world. Thus the religious mood of these people remained unshaken. They managed to dope themselves with this sort of intellectual opium and kept their eyes shut against the logic of facts.

(To be Continued)