

Religion and Its Role in Society

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Abstract: Religion occupies an important place in human society. It is believed by many thinkers that religion is instinctive in men. Almost all the aspects of society including economic and political regions are guided and controlled by it. It formulates human conduct, behaviour, social sense morality etc. But in spite of all these, there are some dark sides of it, for which some thinkers are of the opinion that if religion is eradicated from the society, many bad things will be vanished and people will live peacefully. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the meaning, origin, different aspects and role of religion in society. Side by side efforts will be given to delineate the dark aspects of it and finally to justify the necessity of religion in society.

Key words: Consciousness, God, Religion, Social, suffering.

I. Introduction

1.1 What is Religion?

It can openly be admitted that in defining religion, most of the Indian thinkers follow the definition given by the western thinkers. As the western thinkers believe that the religious approach is theistic in its nature, so the Indian thinkers maintain that religion is some form of theism. This view of western thinkers seems to be an echo of a Scottish theologian and philosopher Robert Flint. According to Flint, both theism and religion are one and the same thing. In his lecture he says the impossibility of anything more than theism. Similarly, there is no religion which is less than theism. This point is stated by William James in another way. He says, "Anything short of God is not rational, anything more than God is not possible."¹

Another definition of religion is given by Galloway which is definitely applicable to theism. According to him, "Man's faith in a power beyond himself whereby he seeks to satisfy emotional needs and gains stability of life, and which he expresses in acts of worship and service."²

By this definition Galloway tries to maintain that the essential feature of religion is a faith in a power beyond men which satisfies the emotional aspect of men.

In explaining the meaning of religion Taylor says that religion is the belief in spiritual beings. But his explanation of the meaning of religion does not satisfy a rational mind as he does not give us a clear picture of the nature of spiritual beings.

Max Muller, a German born philosopher, gives us a vague definition of religion. While explaining the nature of religion he says that in religion infinite is perceived.

There are three different aspects of religious consciousness, viz., intellect, feeling and action. But while defining religion different thinkers emphasise either of the aspects. According to Herber Spencer, religion is a type of hypothesis by which people attempt to comprehend the universe. His definition thus emphasizes the intellectual aspect of religion. Other thinkers like Mc Taggard emphasizes on the emotional aspect neglecting other aspects. Similarly, Frazer's definition of religion emphasizes only the volition and action. But the definition of religion seems to be more or less satisfactory is put forwarded by Robert Flint, as he embraces all the three aspects of religion. According to him, "Religion is man's belief in a being or beings mightier than himself and inaccessible to his senses but not indifferent to his sentiments and actions, with the feelings and practices which flow from such a belief."

The above mentioned definition and analysis of religion is not sufficient. There are so many definitions of religion given by different thinkers at different period of history but none can give us a complete picture of it. "Religion is hard to define, not because there is so little of it, but because there is so much."³ It is fact that God is the central element of religion and men have implicit confidence on Him and they exercise all their attempts to make commune with Him. Thus without mentioning this aspect of religion no definition of it can give us a complete picture of religion.

¹ William James: The Will to Believe and Other Essays, p-116

² George Galloway: The Philosophy of Religion, p- 184

³ Readings from World Religions, Compiled by Champion & Short, p-1

II. Origin of the concept of religion

There are different theories regarding the origin of the concept of religion. But it cannot be certainly said that when and how religious ideas emerged in man. It is also certainly cannot be said that what is the origin of the ideas of religion. All these are due to the fact that there is no broad consensus amongst the thinkers of this field regarding the origin of religion. But there are people who firmly believe that religious ideas are instinctive in man. No other animals except man bear this instinctive feature. Man can be distinguished from other animals from two angles: reason and religion. Man possesses reason while other animals do not and that is why men are called 'rational animals'. Similarly, men are religious while other animals are not. Men bear both finite and infinite features. At the very inception of human race on earth, men were totally ignorant about the different events that occurred in nature around them. But they were curious to know the happenings and accordingly, they applied their own efforts. They had to face the different natural calamities like storms, floods, lightning; dangerous animals, famine etc. and they were unable to overcome these situations. As a result, they had to imagine an invisible power mightier than themselves upon whom they depended for assistance, strength and relief. Thus fear and curiosity are the main factors responsible for the emergence of religious tendency in ancient people. They also believed that this unseen and invisible power would be helpful in their birth, sorrow, old age and finally in obtaining salvation. They sometimes conceived God as their object of love. There are different forms such as, father, friend, lover, beloved, master through which they tried to attain relation with God. Thus, in order to meet their ignorance and to get strength and courage to face natural calamities, men time and again depended on an imaginary existence, the result of which is named 'God' in religion.

III. Different aspects of religion

There are different aspects of religion such as, internal and external, individual and social.

In religious consciousness an emotional element is present. The emotional elements are- ideas, thoughts and feelings. Not only that, it also concerns man's relation to God. Thus these emotional elements as well as intellectual elements are referred by internal aspect. Apart from this an important aspect of religion is practical activities such as, rites and ceremonies. These practical activities are different ways through which men express their religious feelings. Thus these practical activities are referred in external aspect of religion.

But although it is claimed that God is the central element of religion, there are religion without God or gods. Some of these religions are-Buddhism, Jainism and Comte's religion of humanity. Crawley also holds that the fundamental feature of religion is 'sacred ceremony'. He believes that religion is possible without making any reference to God or gods. But there are thinkers who are of the opinion that without reference to God the true sense of religion is not possible. Many others claim that those who do not believe the reality of God in their religion, there is reference of communion between 'man' and something beyond man' in their religion.

Religion is, in fact, an individual matter. It is individual who acquires religious experience and he has conviction on it. He personally realizes religious experiences in his life. He believes that salvation can be attained through performing religious activities. But to a social philosopher, social aspect of religion is more important and carries greatest significance. This social aspect is emphasized by all the great religions of the world. It is because of the fact that religion plays an important role in maintaining social unity, its promotion and maintenance. The religion which emphasizes this social aspect is the religion of humanity, although in traditional sense this aspect is not recognized as religion. In emphasizing the social aspect of religion Blackmar and Gillin, the famous sociologists say that without community worship, no religious faith can survive for long time. They are of the opinion that a living religion may lose all its importance if the believer and worshiper of that religion ceases to worship together.

IV. Role of religious institutions in society

As religion so its institutions also play an important role in social life. None can deny the fact that the different kinds of social institutions such as, domestic, economic and political influence on religious institutions. But it is also true that these institutions are sometimes influenced by religious institutions. An important aspect of religion is prayer and different classes of people belonging to different castes of society assemble in religious institutions for performing prayer and worship. By these activities there forms common feelings which thereby further generate a common sentiments and fellowship amongst the worshipers of a particular religion. Sometimes it is found that the members of a particular religion unite together, and for the greater interest of the society they perform different humanitarian activities. It is evident from the above that religious institutions perform not only their religious activities, they also discharge different types of activities related to social welfare such as, charitable hospitals, schools, homes for the homeless. These institutions also run orphanages and collect money for the poor people.

It cannot be denied that religion has an external form of social control. The different activities of the people and their different spheres of social life are still influenced by religious rites and ceremonies. People generally express their religious feelings through rituals and ceremonies. It is also true that almost all the aspects

of lives of primitive people were covered by religious practices, although these were crude in nature and did not have any precise organization. We find that there are different important occasions in our social life such as, birth, marriage, harvesting, hunting, death etc. and in all these activities religious rites were performed in primitive societies. By doing these activities there developed a common feeling s and actions which are very much other than religious functions. Not only in primitive societies but also in modern societies religious activities occupy an important place. The different occasions of social life, such as birth, death, marriage etc. religious rites are performed. Similar activities are found in the events related with economic life also. Moreover, it is found that, in almost all communities religious rites are common practices during various occasions in social life such as, inauguration of a new building, oath taking etc. From the above description of the role of religion in social life, it is evident that a regular order of procedure is developed by religion in society and thus it helps to control the society.

Religion helps to shape the character of an individual and thereby it moulds social life. It brings forth the sense of social value in the mind of people. In obeying the social laws or to respect the elders and to show sympathy towards the feelings of others, or to discharge the social obligations faithfully, the role of religion is immense. In those cases it acts as a teacher. Not only this, a sense of fellow feeling amongst the people belonging to different communities is also taught by religion. Moreover, religion teaches that the man's love and services to God will be real only if he loves and serves humanity. In developing moral consciousness amongst people, religion acts as an inspiring factor. Religion enforces uniformity of behaviour and it strengthens social solidarity and thereby acts as an instrument in stabilizing social order.

In primitive age the influence of religion was very great in controlling society and this feature is not totally lost even today. Social life of primitive people were controlled by inspiring God-fear in their minds but in modern age people are inspired not by fear but by the hope for the attainment of virtuous and noble life. Thus by fostering patriotic sentiments in men, religion helps to maintain social integration.

In describing the role of religion Dr. S. Radhakrishnan says that religion has innumerable effects. Religion not only guarantees values but it also gives meaning to life. Moreover, the confidence to go on adventures is also inculcated in our mind by religion. Thus narrating the role of religion he 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".⁴

People live in the third world countries such as, India, Africa, Brazil etc. derive their sense of life from religion and as such religion is very important to them. They get the answers of many questions that appear in their minds. The questions such as, who we are? What is the purpose of life? What is life and what is death? Is there anything after this life? - are very common for human being and they are curious to have answers of these questions. But in the third world countries science is not so developed to answer these questions. Thus, it is religion from which they seek to get answers of these questions.

V. Summary of the paper

From the above discussion we can summerise the importance of religion in society.

1. People get mental peace from religion.
2. Religion explains the causes and remedies of individual sufferings and as such it console people in their junctures.
3. The important function that religion performs is that it inculcates social virtues in people like truth, honesty, love, discipline etc.
4. Religion works as an instrument in converting animal qualities to human quality.
5. Religious education teaches people for promoting social welfare.
6. Religious rites and festivals are means of recreations.
7. Religion creates values amongst people and as such it is the source of social cohesion.
8. Religion is an important instrument for promotion social solidarity.
9. Religious institutions help in controlling the behaviour of the individual.
10. Religion works as an instrument of influencing political system.
11. In economic field religion works as an instrument of influence.
12. Religion works as an effective means in strengthening self-confidence of people.

VI. Comments

So far we have discussed, it is evident that religion acts as an instrument of social control and integration. But these are not all of religion. There are many dark sides of religion which needs mention.

From the pages of history we find that religion created conflict and disunity in society. The glaring examples of these are –conflict between the Protestants and Roman Catholics, between the Hindus and the

⁴. S. Radhakrishnan: Religion and Society; George Allen and Unwin, London, 1947, p-42.

Muslims. Not only had these, the conflict of religion led to the religious wars of the sixteenth century. In many cases it is proved that religious fanaticism is responsible for much inhuman bloodshed. Sometimes it is seen that religion creates an obstacle in the development of the free spirit in common people. This was prominent in the middle ages where free enquiry and independent thinking was thwarted by religion.

Again, there are so many immoral acts that have been going on in the name of religion and as a result society and its members have been suffering. In twentieth century this religious intolerance has been increased in a rapid way. The demolition of the Babri Masjid on the 6th December, 1992, the destruction of Church on the 9th August, 1998 at Ahmedabad, the barbarous murder of an Australian Missionary Graham Stains and her two sons in Orissa on 23rd January, 1999 are some of the examples of this religious intolerance. The present communal feelings amongst the different communities of society are the glaring example of the destructive aspects of religion. Some people intentionally utilize religion for their own interest. Above all, conflicts are everywhere in our societies in the name of religion. Thus observing the present condition of religion, some people opine that if religion could be eradicated from the society then society as well as its members will be saved and they will live peacefully.

That religion is an instrument of social disharmony is evident from different religious riots held in different periods of time, even today, in different countries of the world.

VII. Conclusion

So far I have delineated the role of religion in society, it is clear that the negative aspect of religion is tremendous in our society. Not only this, religion restricts free thinking of human beings. It produces a sense of numbness in man and thereby makes him insensible to the actual happenings of the world. It teaches people to live in the world of determinism. People forget the capacity of their free thinking and which ultimately makes them blunt in analyzing the natural phenomena scientifically. It is true that in primitive society science was not so developed and people were ignorant about the happenings of natural phenomena. At that time religion was necessary to control the barbarous and ignorant people. People were satisfied with the answers given by religious institutions. Even in mediaeval period people were convinced that the sun moves round the earth and challenging which the great scientist Galileo, on a charge of heresy, had to spend the rest of his life under house arrest. But now it is scientifically proved that the earth moves round the sun.

Thus if institutional religion is eradicated from the society, people will live peacefully and there will be less possibility of quarrels and bloodshed amongst the people. They will also be able to understand the happenings of natural phenomena scientifically.

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