

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

by

SWAMI KRISHNANANDA

The Divine Life Society
Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh, India

Website: swami-krishnananda.org

Religion and spirituality are the two defining factors in the determination of the higher values of life. These two functions of the inner call of a human being correspond to life in the world and life in God. The relationship between the world and God is also the relationship between religion and spirituality. It is said that God manifested Himself as the world. Then, equally, we may say that spirituality manifests itself as religion. Here we come face-to-face with the necessity to describe the characteristics of God. It is generally believed that God is all-pervading, all-knowing and all-powerful. But these three features usually associated with God are connected with space and objects in time; while space, time and objects are subsequent to God's Original Being prior to creation. This would mean that no quality or attribute can be associated with God, even with the farthest stretch of one's imagination. Nevertheless, it should be accepted that every conceivable quality or character should have its potential existence in God Himself. Or, else, from where did these qualities arise? Here we have a hint at the nature of religion and the nature of spirituality.

In India there is a discipline prescribed for the gradual evolution of the human individual by stages of (1) education, (2) adjustment of oneself with the demands of natural and social living and, (3) an austere detachment from the usual entanglements in life and (4) final rootedness of oneself in God. This last mentioned stage is known as Sannyasa and the

first two stages are the religious disciplines preparing a person for the third and the fourth stages.

Religion has its various restrictions imposed on a person, keeping all human activity confined to specific areas of living with its several do's and don'ts – 'do this' and 'do not do that'. There cannot be any religion without these two mandates imposed on man. People in the first two stages of life mentioned above are placed under an obligation to follow these dos and don'ts of religion in social behaviour, in personal conduct and dealings with people in any manner whatsoever. Every religion has these ordinances defining the duties, which are religious, whether in the form of ritual, worship, or pilgrimage and even in diet daily ablution, and an exclusive literal devotion to the word of the scripture of the religion. These restrictions are lifted in the third stage where the life of a person is mainly an internal operation of thought, feeling and understanding and not connected with human society in any way.

Hindu codes of conduct called Smritis have often stuck vehemently to their promulgation of the superiority of the Brahmin (Brahmana) giving lesser importance to the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Shudra, a classification characteristic specially to the Hindu religion. As such, the Smritis and scriptures of that kind do not consider people who are not Brahmins as sacred and pure. Foreigners were called Yavanas and Mlecchas, which words mean infidels. Thus, travel to the land of these infidels was considered as contaminating the purity of the Brahmin, and one who took to such foreign travels, across the seas, was debarred from the community of Brahmins.

But, the Sannyasin is an Atyashramin, that is, transcending the caste system, because the Sannyasin transcends social law, and he was even considered to have undergone civil death. He is not anymore one of the four castes. He is rooted in God and he is a man of God and he has no restrictions even as God Himself has no restrictions.

The point is then that those who have a hesitation to feel that they are rooted in God have to follow these rules, but if the Sannyasin is sure that he is fixed in God-consciousness, no rules apply to him. He is free in every way. While the caste system was originally evolved for the necessary classification of human duty in order to preserve the organic stability of society, its original meaning and its philosophical foundation was forgotten through the passage of time, and bigotry and fanaticism took its place through the preponderance of egoism, greed and hatred, contrary to the practice of true religion as a social expression of inner spiritual aspiration for a gradual ascent, by stages, to God Almighty.

Vidura, famous in the Mahabharata, was born of a Shudra woman. But he had the power to summon the son of Brahma, from Brahmaloaka, by mere thought. Which orthodox Brahmin can achieve this astounding feat?

It is, therefore, necessary for everyone to have consideration for the facts of world-unity and goodwill, Sarvabhuta-hita, as the great Lord mentions in the Bhagavadgita. Justice is more than law. No one's body is by itself a Brahmin, because it is constituted of the five gross elements – earth, water, fire, air and ether. Else, it would be a sin on the part of a son to consign to flames the lifeless body of a Brahmin father.

It is therefore, not proper to victimise a colleague by an action plan of any religious community wedded to fundamentalist doctrines.

Through the process of evolution, the world has now become a global village. Sun, moon, stars and the galaxies operate in a cosmic co-operative spirit. The air that we breathe, moving everywhere freely, has no nationality, no ethnic distinction. We live by the free gift of Nature. Any assertion of isolated individuality is not in consonance with the way the Universe is operating. Events have cosmic connotations. Creation is one, even as God is One.