

THE MEANING OF RELIGION AND THE SPIRITUAL ATTITUDE IN LIFE

by

SWAMI KRISHNANANDA

The Divine Life Society
Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh, India

Website: swami-krishnananda.org

When we observe a religious occasion and rejoice in a celebration or perform a function, we are not merely playing a joke with the time at our disposal. It is not a diversion in which we engage ourselves, because the preciousness of time and the value of life is well known. The observances that are religious are not, therefore, diversions in any manner whatsoever. They are not just escape outlets from the boredom of day-to-day life. Also, it has to be mentioned that religion is not one of the activities of life so that we turn to religious moods and engage ourselves in religious performances just as we change our offices and get into the different kinds of jobs. There is a marked distinction between the performance of a job, or doing any work in life, and entering into a religious atmosphere – awakening a religious mood in one's mind. Religion is not an activity; this is a very important point to remember, which may be surprising to many people. It is not something that you *do* in the sense of a secular performance of a deed in human society.

As a matter of fact, religion has nothing to do with human society. It is something personal, leading to a larger impersonality of significance which is implanted in the personality of individuals. It is an inward turning of the mind towards its source, gradually by stages, rather than an outward meandering in the social field of work and entertainment, so that the intensity of a religious achievement cannot be observed by outward activity or conduct. You cannot look at the face of a person and judge the religious value, or the intensity to which that person has reached, because it is an inner adjustment of consciousness which is privately done by each individual – himself or herself – in relation to a reality which transcends relationships. Religion is a non-relational endeavour on the part of the human mind to attain the secret of existence, and therefore, while it may commence with the immediate realities of life such as social relationship and the rituals of religion, the intention of religion is to go above; and the intention is what counts and what matters in the religious attitudes of people. Your intention, your motive – that is important. Your mood is important, and the content of your consciousness or mind at the time of your engaging yourself in a religious performance is important, and perhaps that is the only thing that is important; so that, the form of religion is different from the intention of religion.

If religion today has perhaps not come up to the level expected of it, and if we have something lacking in the various religious fields of life, this shortcoming has to be attributed to an emphasis that has been laid overmuch on the formality of religion rather than the intention, the motive and the purpose or the spirit of religion. Religion is nothing but a spirit which you adopt in your life and attitude in general so that, if that is absent, religion becomes a corpse, a skeleton, without flesh and blood in it. It may have all the appearances of a living organism, but it has no life in it. So we can have lifeless religions, yet they may look like religions – just as a dead body may look like a human being, but it is not a human

being because it has lost its value, which is the spirit of existence.

It is difficult to enter into a real religious attitude in life because the mind of the human being is caught up in certain prejudices and subtle longings which hanker after satisfaction even when the initial enthusiasm is religious. We do not entirely become religious even when we enter a temple. We have still our secular personality with us – a kind of encrustation grown on our minds – and it is impossible to be totally religious, even inside the holy of holies. That is, our personalities cannot be shed even in the altar of God. This is a great bar to any kind of substantial achievement in the religious field.

First of all, there is a gross misconception about God himself, and every other misconception follows from it. What we call religion is nothing but our attitude to God, and if the concept of God is blunderous – there is something seriously wrong with the concept – the attitude, naturally, will have the impact of this error. And, many other corollaries follow from this basic error of wrong concept. Whether God exists or not may be a subtle question that the mind may raise within itself, and this question may be smothered over, stifled by the overwhelming impression produced upon the mind through contact with scriptures, saints and elders. But, our religious life is not something thrust upon us by others – not even by a saint or a scripture. It is a growth that takes place from inside, and it is a part of our being that becomes religious. As I mentioned already, it is not a relational conduct which we adopt in our life in respect of elders, saints or scriptures, etc., but a blossoming of our own personalities from within, in its inner contact with reality. So, unless the concept of reality is adequate to the purpose, the means adopted in achieving it, or attaining it, may fall short of the purpose.

The art of rousing in oneself a religious mood is essentially the crux of the whole matter. It is not merely thinking a God that is in the heavens, or an image that is in a

temple, or an atmosphere in a church, etc. that is religion; it is something quite different. What is the difference? Again, I have to bring your mind back to what I told you a few minutes before: it is an inward attunement of our mind with a form of reality which stands there as a counterpart of our personal life. In a way we may say that religious consciousness is that attainment by which the mind within tunes itself in harmony with its counterpart by coming in contact with which it becomes a complete whole, so that religion is the technique of becoming whole or complete in one's life; whereas every other performance is a side activity of our life which keeps us always half, or less than half, but never whole. What is the reason behind our dissatisfactions throughout the walks of life? We never feel that we are complete or whole at any time in our life. Even if we have a large family which loves us dearly, even if we have plenty of wealth, even if we are well placed in society, we never feel that we are full or complete. We are always inadequate; there is something which is lacking in us. We have an unhappiness and sorrow when we go to bed in the night, whatever be our social status or the power that we wield or the wealth that we possess. What is this peculiarity which keeps us always unhappy? Each person should put this question to himself: "Why am I unhappy? I have got plenty of money; I have got a lot of power; I have got a large group of friends. What is it that I lack? Everything I have that worthwhile having, but I am not a complete person. I have an insecurity which is secretly eating into my vitals. What is this insecurity?" That is something inscrutable, and it is a question which religion can answer, and nobody else can answer.

The unhappiness that is at the core of our life arises not because we do not have position of external wealth, power, or social relationships, but because we have a basic disconnection of ourselves with the reality that is outside. We are fundamentally outside the realm of reality. We live in a world of appearances, and whatever wealth we accumulate is nothing but a group of appearances. Many follies put together do not make one wisdom. And so, whatever be the

accumulation of material values in life, that cannot be equal to even a jot of reality in life. We can have plenty of things, and yet they can be tinsels and worthless things. This is exactly what we are having in life. It is, therefore, important to remember that social values and material ways of calculating, etc., should not be introduced into the religious atmosphere. You are not a big person in religious atmosphere; there is no such thing as bigness in religion. And no social importance can be attached, so that when you go to a church, you don't go like an emperor. You are a different symbol altogether there, representing a non-social unit.

Essentially, a human being is an indivisible unit which has a non-social character; it cannot be associated with something else. It has a uniqueness of its own, a status of its own, and that is why you assert yourself in many ways in life. Self-assertion is an indication that you have a status of your own, which cannot be made good, or complimented, by anything that is outside you. Whatever be the external association, whatever be the magnitude of this association externally, this uniqueness persists. That uniqueness is the indivisibility of your being. There is something peculiar in you which you yourself cannot understand, and it is this peculiarity that asks for satisfaction in religion. It cannot be satisfied by wealth or any other thing that is available in the world. It can be satisfied only by the uniqueness of what it asks for. It is a wonder, indeed – what we really are essentially is a wonder, a miracle, a marvel.

We live a kind of life internally which is quite different from the life we live outwardly, as we all know very well. This internal life is more important to us than the external one, and the internal one sometimes comes in conflict with the external atmosphere due to uniqueness, as I mentioned. And, the conflict arises on account of the inability on our part to fulfil the needs of this uniqueness in us and paying too much attention to the external relationships – which we mistake for realities in life – as the aims of existence itself. There is a correlative, or a counterpart, to every state of mind, which is the fulfilment of the mind. This alone can

complement the mind and supplement the mind's needs, and to discover that a particular counterpart of our need is the secret of life, or the secret of life's success. We experiment in different things – whether this is our objective or that is our objective – so we go to different things, different persons and different walks of life to find out if that is the thing that will satisfy us. Nothing satisfies, because what the mind needs is not an external correlate but an inward correlate akin to its own make-up and character, which is essentially indivisible, unique and fundamental in its nature.

There is, at the bottom of things, a fundamentality akin to that which is in own nature, and this uniqueness can be seen in everyone and everything – even in an atom. There is some peculiar differentia that can be discovered even in the minutest of things in the world, which cannot be defined by relationship with others. It defies all kind of definition. With *that* it is that we wish to come in contact. That uniqueness is sometimes called the Selfhood of things – the *atmatva*, in Sanskrit literature particularly. You must have heard the word *atman* or Self, etc. These terms designate a particular uniqueness of indivisibility of being in everyone and everything which seeks for fulfilment in a committee of harmony. That is the inward secret of religious aspiration: a self asking for a Self, the *jivatman* asking for the *paramatman* – we may like to put it in that manner – and not a Mr. So-and-so or Mrs. So-and-so asking for something in the world. That is not religion.

Again, it is essential to remember that we come to brass tacks and take this question very seriously if our life is to be taken seriously at all. We are not merely to trifle with our life, because what we call life, as it is visible to our eyes, is a phantom – it passes quickly. We are unnecessarily clinging to a form of existence which we call life; a physical existence, a bodily life or a social life, etc. which is here today, and tomorrow is not. It is a thing which we know very well, and yet we cannot appreciate the significance of this occurrence in life. We cling to the forms in spite of the observation that forms do not persist. They always pass away, and can pass

away at any moment; this includes our own bodily form. Yet, we seem to be interested only in pampering the needs of the physical form and physical relationships of life, which is a muddle in our social and mental life.

This is to be rectified by a proper resort to what we may call true religion, which is the contemplation of the values which are meaningful to what we are basically, essentially and privately. For instance, when you are thrown into the wilderness with nobody around you, no friends to look at your face, you are cast into the winds – just imagine for a moment that you have nothing with you, not even a rag of cloth on your body, which a situation in which anyone can find oneself any day – when you have nothing around you, not one human being around you, when everything is gone and you are disposed of all things, what would be your need at that time? Your learning is not going to come help you because it is nothing; your degrees of university will mean nothing at that time. A gross question can be posed: suppose you are faced by a lion or a tiger in a jungle – you are alone in the thick of a jungle in the night and a hoard of lions attacks you from all sides – what is it that can protect you? Your learning? Your education? Your degrees? Your money? Nothing! You are helpless to the core. So there can be things in life which can put you out of gear at once, in spite of the position of all things that you usually think as very valuable. I am only giving a very extreme example of lions attacking you, but there can be people attacking people. And, you should not be under the misconception that people are all friends in the world. It is not true. The people in society are not friends. They are friends only conditionally. Every relationship, every friendship, is conditional. That is, it exists as long as certain conditions are fulfilled. You know very well what I mean. Every relationship of 'A' with 'B', 'B' with 'C', etc. – what you may call social relationship – even the dearest and the nearest and the strongest relationship is conditional. If certain conditions necessary for the maintenance of this relationship are not fulfilled, the relationship will break at one stroke and what you call relationship will not be there.

You will stand alone as you were born from the mother's womb.

We are not to invite such situations by being too foolish in our attitudes to things. We must be on guard at all times and be conscious of the ultimate aim of our life, which is something which escapes our notice every day but yet beckons us secretly, on account of which we are restless at all times and yet hopeful at every moment. Restlessness and hope for the future are two characters of a peculiarity in human nature. Nothing can satisfy us; we are always restless. That is one fact of life. But, we always hope for a better thing tomorrow. This is another peculiarity in us. "It will not be so bad tomorrow as it is today – tomorrow will be better, things will be better." Who told you that things will be better tomorrow? There is something in you which says that, after all, the end of things cannot be chaos; there should be perfection. That perfection within you is the element that seeks religious achievement and religious attainment. That is the symbol from which you can reach out to the 'God of religion' who is, as I mentioned to you, the counterpart of what you lack in your fundamental nature. The counterpart of what you lack does not mean the wealth of the world, or the social relationship of the world, but what you are essentially. The spiritual unit that you are seeks for a perfection and fulfillment which can be effected only by that which is akin in its nature to itself in the outer world.

Thus in religion the spirit within summons the spirit without, and it becomes an endeavour which is wholly spiritual. We can't ultimately distinguish between religion and spirituality. Spirituality is the basic character and religion is the outward mode of it, the form which it takes. A non-temporal asking by the spirit of man is the religious aspiration of man. It is not an asking for anything that is temporal. Thus it requires self-control, self-restraint, control of the senses and the mind, which are all clamorous about fulfillment of things, fulfillment of desires with respect of their own objects outside. The clamour of the senses of the mind has to be subdued so that the voice of the spirit can be

heard from within. As it has sometimes been said, religion is what you do when you are absolutely alone – that is your religion. Religion is not what you do in the presence of other people. What you do when you are absolutely alone – that is your religion. Also it is said that religion is the adoption of an aloneness in one's life, a recognition that you are absolutely alone here, without any kind of external relationship – a fact which will be known when things reveal their true natures. You are even now alone. You have no relationships. But that there is an external relationship pampering you is a misconception in the mind. They can open up their true, real nature at any time, and you will stand alone once again, in the wilderness of things.

So the aloneness of the spirit asks for the aloneness of perfection – 'the flight of the alone to the alone', as philosophers will tell you. Alone you stand in this world! *Namutra hi sahayartham pita mata ca tisthatah. Na putradarah na jnatih dharmas tisthati kevalah* (Manu Smriti 4.238), the great codifier of law, Manu, tells us in his *smriti*. *Namutra hi sahayartham pita mata ca tisthatah*: Your mother and father will not come to help you in the other world. *Na putradarah*: Your children, your family – they are not going to help you when the hour for departing comes. What comes with you? You will go in the same way as you came to this world. You did not bring even a piece of cloth when you came, you did not bring a broken needle when you came, and when you go you will not take anything – so how is it that you have accumulated so much in the middle? The property does not belong to you. *Dharmas tisthati kevalah*: *Dharma* will come with you. What you have thought, what you have felt, what you have done – the impact of that will come with you, not anything else.

It is this awakening that is necessary before we adopt a truly religious life and become God-conscious. A psychological cleansing of the cobwebs of life is necessary before we begin to become really spiritual in our life. Spirituality is a very advanced state of affairs, and before that attainment is aspired for, it is necessary that we should

prepare ourselves for this attainment – that is, the purification of the personality by freedom from desires that are temporal, transient, binding, and not helpful in the life to come. The life to come is not that which will come after fifty years or hundred years; it is a thing that can come after one minute, or even few minutes.

Therefore, an eternal vigilance on the part of the human being is called for so that we are perpetually religious. This mood of watchfulness, inwardly in the spirit, divesting ourselves of all physical associations, bodily attachments and psychological pride – freeing ourselves from all these accretions that have grown upon our true nature – we stand independent and resplendent in our own spiritual character and endeavour to commune this true spark of spirit that we are with the conflagration of spirit that is in the cosmos, which is the Supreme Being, the God of the universe. That is the aim of religion ultimate.

As Swami Shankaranandaji Maharaj mentioned just now towards the conclusion of his speech, Lord Siva is, in the religion of the Hindus, represented as a great example of religious and spiritual perfection. Detachment and attainment are the two great characteristics represented in the emblem of Lord Siva. Total relinquishment of all transient values, which is the highest form of *virakti* or *vairagya*, and an attainment which is supreme – omniscience itself – is the possession of this Great Being who wants nothing and has everything. His personality is usually represented as clad in feeble raiment, not in gorgeous clothes, living in the icy peaks without any palatial abode, with no friends, with no relations, asking for nothing, wanting nothing, and having nothing to do with anyone. That sort of isolated existence, in the peak of the Himalayas, is coupled with that supreme attainment of *samadhi* in which He is supposed to be absorbed in at all times, eternally. You will find Lord Siva portrayed as absorbed in the Universal Being of Himself, with closed eyes and locked-up fingers, knees, etc., which represents the essence of religion. *Tyaga*, or renunciation of everything that is contrary to spiritual

attainment, and a simultaneous effort to achieve the positive aspect of it, the positive side of it – namely, divinity and perfection – are the themes of the two great injunctions in the *yoga sastra* which are *vairagya* and *abhyasa*, renunciation and practice, the negative relinquishment of temporal values and the positive achievement of spiritual perfection by degrees. The rituals, the worships, the chantings, the recitations, the studies, and the austere observances such as fasting, vigil – all these are auxiliaries to the inducement of this consciousness in us.

To sum up, I may only say that this, in outline, is the psychology of religion and the meaning of the spiritual attitude in life.

God bless you all.