

# THE SPIRIT AND THE LETTER

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Human aspiration is a miracle by itself. It is not always easy to precisely discover and streamline towards action the implementation or the fulfilment of the longings of the human mind. In most cases, the very way of one's thinking and feeling is moulded by the circumstances and the atmosphere of the family and the neighbourhood in which one is brought up from childhood onwards. This is particularly the case with the religious inclinations and community feelings which almost become inseparable from the general outlook and the very mode of life of a person. Do we not see in our daily life the parochial and segregating effect produced upon one's personality and outlook by the very language one speaks? The impact of language upon one's mind is so intense that it has successfully managed to determine the cultural pattern of people who begin to feel that they are a sort of chosen society entirely different from others, because of the hidden implications of the language which one speaks, affecting profoundly one's life and cultural background. People become believers or non-believers according to the definition and the meaning

attached to these terms by the impact of such circumstances as mentioned above. There is, perhaps, some point in certain classical thinkers, both ancient and modern, holding the opinion that man is a social product, a creature of circumstances, almost equivalent to an article manufactured by social, economic and political conditions.

On a broad view of the conditions in which man lives, it may certainly appear that the stuff of human nature is just this much. However, irrespective of a large number of people blown helplessly by the winds of external conditions, who may be under the pressure of concluding forever that they are results of what things are outside them on account of a feeling of utter dependence on circumstances, yet it would remain to be seen if man is nothing more than what is made by factors other than himself. By these external factors, people are likely to mean people other than themselves; else, what can these external factors be? Are they the sun, the moon and the stars, the mountains and the rivers? The complaints of man seem to be against men other than he, and his feeling of dependence, thus, is obviously the notion that the existence and behaviour of other people constitute the conditioning factors of his life. But who are these 'others' which one is thinking of in one's mind, inasmuch one's own self is also an 'other' to somebody else? There is, evidently, some hidden mix-up in the opinion generally held that man is conditioned by social, economic and political atmospheres, because there is no such atmosphere which can be considered as wholly alien, and everyone can become a conditioning factor for everyone else.

Is the human individual totally bereft of any stuff other than or different from conditions which may be regarded as external? A by-product of conditions, which man is many a time considered to be, can have no substantiality in itself, nothing that can be called real, apart from a relative phenomenon, a transitory situation, which is the only value that can be attached to a 'produced' something. But is man finally prepared to accept this judgement on himself? The definition of man alluded to turns him into a means, because of his being a 'product', but how could there be merely a means unless it is directed to an end; how could a product or an effect convey any meaning unless it is occasioned by causes other than itself? Here it may be argued that 'society' is the end, for whose satisfaction the human individual is converted into a means, and social, economic and political conditions are the causes behind the effect in the form of the human individual who is either a subservient satellite or a means or instrument to be utilised or put to use. The position that society is just a name for a group of people or an organisation of individuals has been rebutted by social and anthropological philosophers holding, as they do, that a society is more than the people which constitute it. If people are just the same as society, and vice-versa, there can be no complaint of man against society, and no man would be a product of society or social conditions. But, if society is something outside of, beyond and transcendent to people who seem to be its constituents, the fact that the conditions of human living are a consequence of the social set-up would take one to realities which are not human – we may say, superhuman. If the latter is the truth, man's limitations are not to be equated to

the irreconcilable positions of other people, but the irreconcilability which man feels in regard to something which is beyond the location of any human being. Society would then assume the shape of a super-individual impersonal force which is immanent in individuals, because they cannot stand outside it, but which, at the same time, transcends everyone because it cannot be identified with anyone, even with everyone. That man is conditioned by superhuman powers would be an acceptance that the life of people is not entirely dependent on how other people are or how other people behave. What else is religion if not the conclusive acceptance and belief that empirical life is a phenomenon determined by laws and regulations of a higher beyond?

But this religious impulse that reality is a beyond something, can easily be misinterpreted and misconstrued by the enthusiasm that characterises many seekers, which imagines a beyond this world, beyond human society, for the sake of which the world and people may be renounced. Religious injunctions have not infrequently been understood in this sense of a requisition for a *literal* abnegation or abandonment of the visible, for the sake of the invisible beyond, though the *spirit* of the religious requirement on this issue is a little difficult to decipher, especially when minds which take to religion are empirically bound to an unavoidable and irresistible feeling that the world and people are real things, while at the same time there is the urge towards a trans-empirical ideal which is notionally abstracted from the real visibles as a goal to be pursued. A sense of contradiction here cannot be avoided by anyone who pauses to think for a while.

The crux of religious living may be said to be in this knotty problem of the relation of the empirical to the transcendent, of the visible to the invisible, of concern with people to religious devotion, of the world to the ultimate reality of existence. Religious renunciation, which is the essence of what is known as spiritual life, is a hard nut to crack, since the mind which seeks the transcendent is, more often than not, sunk in the values seen in empirical life and it cannot escape the predicament of bifurcating the transcendent goal from empirical life, inasmuch as what the mind can sense and feel is only that which is seen with the eyes, heard with the ears or touched by the hand, tasted or smelt, and no one has ever seen or sensed a beyond the world. This unfortunate condition of mental operations makes God, spirituality and religion a concern wholly unrelated to the sensed and the visible facts of empirical life, something which has nothing to do with anyone or anything, *here*.

Hunger and thirst, heat and cold, and the natural biological and psychic impulses from which no one can be said to be entirely free, or ever free, affirm the values that go with the visible world, and the religious seeker has perforce to strike a harmony between what pulls him to the earth and that which ideologically spurs him to a transcendent beyond. Failure to achieve this purpose, and to fulfil the laws of this pressing necessity, may endanger the very intention behind it, the principles of religion and spirituality, and reduce these noble longings of the spirit of man to a sham enactment of an impossible adventure. The rigours associated with renunciation in the religious or spiritual sense have mostly bordered upon a condemnation

of all earthly values and meanings in doing or having anything at all here, a condemnation which is mentally exercised in a theoretical fashion, while simultaneously feeling the pinch of the pressure to subject oneself to the material, biological and psychological needs of life in the world. People there are who think that religion has never succeeded finally. Yes; how could it succeed if it is just a name for this tension made to appear between the here and the hereafter?

The strength of religion is the power it wields by bringing about an inward communion of the particular with the general, the limited with the unlimited, the individual with the universal. In fact, there can be no value or meaning or strength conceivable except as a vital participation of the organic part with that living whole to which it is integrally related. Not only this; it would be difficult even to exist, except in terms of a participation in the structural pattern of the degree or reality immediately above the present condition of existence, or mode of living, the circumstances of life, as it is called. Nothing, thus, can be a greater solace to man than the pursuit of the religious ideal rightly understood in its spirit, since there would be no significance in existence itself if it is bereft of a relation to, or participation in, the reality which is the very soul and substance of that which so participates in an inward relation. The 'generals' and the 'universals' referred to range themselves one beyond the other until the final generality or universality, outside which nothing can be, is achieved in experience. This series of a range of the degrees of reality may be compared to the series of the stages of the development of a sapling into the mature and widespread

banyan tree, or the stages by which a baby grows into a stalwart or genius. It is to be noted here, in this analogy, that the stages or degrees mentioned are vital, intrinsic and organic, and not layers of isolated things placed one over the other.

But the weakness of all religious seeking, which is so much spoken of, and even made much of, is the hypocrisy in which man may unconsciously and unwittingly find himself due to the distressing dichotomy which he may feel within himself between the real calls of empirical life and the ideal longings for what he considers as his goal beyond mortal life, transcending all earthly glory. A hint as to the nature of this difficulty has already been given in what is pointed out above. In most cases, this problem becomes poignant, and the religious life throughout may reduce itself to an unavoidable misery. The whole project may end in a travesty. It is this dark side of a failure in religious life that especially attracts the critics of religion, of anything that is considered as a way of holy living. To the sceptical outlook which doubts everything, the material values of physical existence appear to dictate terms even to the way one thinks, feels or understands, and man's internal life becomes just an exudation of external nature.

It has been pointed out time and again that the internal life of thought and consciousness cannot exude from material causes, unless the former, which is considered to be an effect, is potentially hidden and is latent in the latter which is the cause. The necessity to recognise the latent presence of consciousness in its supposed cause, which is said to be matter in some form, obliges one to locate consciousness everywhere in the very structure of matter,

which position would turn matter into a veritable embodiment of consciousness, such that there would be nothing to distinguish between matter and consciousness, or, to go a little further, between cause and its effect. This little consequence that would follow from the theory that consciousness is an offshoot of matter would defeat the very purpose of the materialist supposition. There would be no matter left if consciousness is to be immanent in it. So much about the net result of the highly adumbrated doctrine that matter is the only reality and consciousness is its baby. Can we see here some sort of an answer to the insistence that man is a product of natural forces? This is apart from the obvious need felt to presuppose consciousness even to know that matter, or any object outside, exists at all, whether independent of the principle of consciousness, or otherwise.

The religious life, like the science of mathematics, is an inviolable and inexorable operation of law, and the validity of the science itself has no relevance to any error that may be committed in the mode of calculation or the assessment of hypotheses. There is, no doubt, every chance of the ideal and the principle getting missed due to the means getting converted into an end in itself, either due to an excessive zeal in putting on an appearance before the public mind, or by a subtle expectation of some gain in the empirical field, or the presence of a desire to achieve a personal end even through means which may, in its outward form, seem wholly altruistic. With this difficulty which is very basic to the foibles and weaknesses to which the biological man particularly is subject, already considered by us above, there is the temptation to reduce religious life or convert it into

the machinery of a spatio-temporal institution, an organisation which can cleverly manage to keep half the hen for cooking and half for laying eggs. This outcome of even the religious zeal is not something unknown to human history, and the very charge against religion that it is an internal illusion occasioned by natural pressures may find itself crowned once again to rule in hell rather than serve in heaven. While the religious spirit is essentially a movement towards enhancement of the dimension of *being*, it can get deadened into the mechanical structure of the fulfilment of social and even political needs. The soul, which is the subliminal root of man, asking for freedom in the realisation of its own infinite comprehensiveness, can get yoked to the plough of institutional and organisational requirements, thus getting transformed into a tool harnessed for work or a mere part of the gadget of an institutional make-up. Here the soul exists for someone else, for an other-than-oneself, by a natural loss of its own status and its very being, in its enslavement to the machine of which it is a part. Work done in this way is tiring, exhausting vitality and distressing to the core, for a mechanised part, which has no soul of its own, cannot but get worn out by the drudgery of labour to which it is subject perforce. This can eventually be the tragic fate of even an otherwise well-intentioned and honest religious seeker, a condition in which the spirit is killed in order to keep the letter alive. This undesirable result of such a life cannot be avoided, unless, of course, one voluntarily sells the soul in order to pamper and parade its psychophysical cravings through the instrumentality of the empirical show which,

for this purpose, is intelligently manoeuvred, whereby the night of the shadow glories beyond the radiance of reality.

A false abstraction of the hereafter from the here, the eternal from the temporal, by forgetting the immanence of the real, through an overestimated concern for the notionally entertained transcendent, is the principal snag in a carelessly led religious behaviour and religious life in general. Since advancement, progress or growth is always organic, the system of ethics, laws and rules cannot but be a living principle by which one achieves a graduated self-transcendence and not a sanction to negation of the lower levels of life. This transcendence is, however, of the nature of a fulfilment in a wider ambit of inclusiveness and is not a resort to rejection for achieving something entirely different or alien. The grown-up tree is not different from the plant that it was, but a self-transcendence in a larger comprehensiveness and maturity of being. Renunciation is not a loss of what one has or a giving up of one's needs, but a positive gain of that which exceeds all possession, an attainment which is the fructification of the total longing of the infinite root of all things. Progress in the religious pursuit is a process of evolution, by which the bud of potential perfection opens systematically into the flower of the realisation of that something which can brook no existence outside its limitless being.