

SPOTLIGHTS ON HINDUISM AND RELIGIOUS VALUES

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1. The influence of religion over the masses is definitely on the wane, since religion, unfortunately, has latterly tended to become formalistic, ritual-ridden and church-oriented, with its social rigidities, mechanised disciplines and an emphasis which began to appear more like an external pressure on the individual rather than a spontaneous incentive for the development of the natural spiritual potentialities of the seeking spirit. Corruption and such other pointers to personal and social deterioration can be attributed ultimately to a lack of the true spiritual sense among mankind.
2. The charge against Hinduism that it is fatalistic is born of an ignorance of the scientific law of cause and effect, traditionally known as karma, upheld by Hinduism as one of its necessary tenets in the field of its vast compass. Very few, even among Hindus, have a correct knowledge of what true Hinduism is. This is perhaps the fate of the majority of followers of the

other religions in the world, also. The interpretation of the law of karma that it inhibits progress by making people slaves to the belief in the inevitability of whatever is to happen is erroneous. The law of karma does not mean that. What it actually implies is that every cause produces an effect of equal force, similar to the force of gravitation in the field of physical nature. Inasmuch as the universe is a balance or an equilibrium of forces and it tends to maintain this balance on any account, a disturbance of this equilibrium by any individualistic action receives a kick back by the power of this equilibrium of the universe in its attempt to restore its lost status quo, and this reaction produced by the universe is really the essence of the law of karma. If it implies any sort of 'inevitability' as suspected, it is the kind of inevitability that is involved in the fall of an apple from a tree due to the law of gravitation. This cannot be called fatalistic with the shade of the anathema that seems to be suggested thereby. The force of karma can be overcome by *purushartha* or the higher creative effort which every individual is capable of and can achieve by a gradual approximation of oneself to the nature of Reality.

The charge of fatalism leveled against Hinduism is therefore unfounded. If well-meaning, highly educated people of today, too, subscribe to this erroneous notion, that would be an added credit to the depth of their knowledge and the profundity of their wisdom!

The catholicity of Hinduism, its breadth of outlook, is not equivalent to a featureless uniformity of approach like a common form of diet that may be prescribed to everyone in the world. The catholicity implies that everyone is equally hungry and needs food, but it does not mean that everyone should be served the same kind of diet. While there is a basic unity among fundamentals, there is an infinite variety in the methods of approach and the working out of the details. The principles of *dharmā*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* as the foundational pre-requisites for an integral approach to life as also the most scientific psychology that is behind what is known as *varnashrama dharmā* are enough testimony to refute the fallacious argument that there is very little that is common in the form of a prescribed formula of religious observances, obligatory for all. It is doubtful if any other religion has within its bosom such a power of absorption, such a strength of transmutation and such a large variety in the methodology of approach as Hinduism.

It is certainly possible to lay down an outline of certain basic minimum observances for all Hindus. The practice of the five *yamas* – *ahimsa*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacharya* and *aparigraha* – with a proper understanding of what these actually mean and how they are to be applied with the necessary permutations and combinations, under different circumstances or conditions of life, an organic approach of life as intended in the canon of the four *purusharthas*

referred to above, as well as a scientific adherence to the psychological principles enshrined in the vehicle of the *varnashrama* system are instances on the point.

3. To equate Hinduism with casteism is again wrong to the hilt. In fact, Hinduism is no 'ism' at all, if an ism means a creed or a cult or even a caste. The name Hinduism was not given to it by the Hindus, and this name was not even known to them before the entry of the Greeks and the Persians into India. The eradication of casteism is quite all right and perhaps necessary if casteism means a fanatical sticking to outdated forms, meaningless routines and an unjustifiable social stratification derogatory to the dignity of the human individual. But if the system of caste means merely an allocation of function to individuals and groups according to their knowledge and capacity for the overall well-being of the organic structure of the human society, it is something which cannot be avoided by anyone who has a proper knowledge of human nature, its ways of working, and its aims in life. It is absurd to make it felt that Harijans are to be exposed to ridicule. If this has happened for any reason, so much the worse for it. Psychological classification for purpose of the fulfilment of the necessary stages in the development of an integrated society cannot include any type of social degradation as a part of its programme. The evil of untouchability has to be abolished and the respect and dignity that are due to a human being in his or her own status or

station in society should be accorded. Let, first of all, everyone be made to feel that they belong to the religion of humanity. Until this is achieved, the religion of God cannot enter the minds of people.

4. Though it may be true to some extent that a study of Sanskrit may help Harijans in feeling a sense of elevation in themselves, and to this extent a study of Sanskrit may be regarded as very helpful, the difficulty cannot be solved by a mere study of the Sanskrit language. The solution lies more in a transformation of the mental attitude that people have towards them or they have towards others, which can be brought about by the spirit of education alone, and education cannot be equated merely with the knowledge of a language, whatever be the importance of the study of a language in the process of education. As for the Harijans, the required incentive can be provided if they can be made to properly understand and appreciate the value of Sanskrit literature as also the knowledge of which it is the medium of expression.
5. The Smritis embody two aspects of *dharma* or the law: (a) *Samanya dharma* or the unchangeable basic law of life which cannot be changed and does not stand in need of any change; and (b) *Visesha dharma* or the special forms of the law of life which have to be changed according to the prevailing conditions, social or personal. This necessity has naturally to be

acceptable to all section of the Hindus, for it is unavoidable.

This does not mean that new Smritis have to come into being, but that their interpretation should be newly oriented according to circumstances. Inasmuch as Hinduism has no common organisation or an established social form of administration as there is, for instance, in Christianity, the ultimate deciding authority in matters of doubt regarding the *visesha dharmas* becomes a little difficult to fix upon. A possible solution is to leave the matter to the heads of the different section of Hinduism, who will decide the nature of the case as applicable to conditions within their own circles. There seems to be no other alternative since there is no single Guru or Head for the whole of the Hindu religion.

6. In the present context of social and international life, it is necessary that the wide reaches of Hinduism should be allowed to take effect without taking sides of any parochial nature, an unfortunate feature that can manifest itself occasionally due to the characteristic weakness of the human mind in general. Though it is difficult to give a complete list of all the correctives that may require to be introduced into the present attitude that Hindus generally have towards their religion, the following essentials may be mentioned as salient issues:

- a) The emphasis on the spirit rather than the letter of the law, that is to say, concentration on the intention, the purpose or the essential significance of a religious mandate rather than a mere mechanistic adherence to the formality of the law. To cite an example, many perform *sandhya vandana* as if they are operating a machine, with neither a knowledge of its meaning or a real faith in its efficacy.
- b) The proper role of ritual in religion, that is, its necessity and value at a particular stage of the religious life as well as its absurdity when it is stretched beyond the permissible limit.
- c) An understanding of the *meaning* of the *varnashrama dharma* as a principle for the solidarity of human society and an eradication of the mistaken idea that it implies an unjust social stratification attended with the notion of function.
- d) The erroneous notion that religion is otherworldly which can be rectified by a correct knowledge of the compound (not complex) of *dharma-artha-kama-moksha* as the foundational ideal of life.
- e) Removal of the mistaken idea that the law of karma implies a passive resignation or a fatalistic attitude.

- f) That *moksha* the supreme ideal of life means a spatial and temporal getting rid of the world or the life in it without the knowledge that it really means a realisation of the Universality of consciousness.
7. A scientific and logical trend of the teachings of the Vedanta has of course attracted the attention of the rationalistic minds, or the intellectuals in society. But it is not true that the emphasis on *jnana* which is one of the features of the Vedanta has been able to enter the hearts of the populace or the common man. The masses still conceive of and adore God in the fashion adumbrated in the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Puranas, Agamas and Tantras, and not necessarily in the way prescribed by the Upanishads. Also, the term 'Vedanta', though it is usually associated with the Upanishads, came to mean later on any teaching which holds God to be the Supreme Reality. In this sense the teachings of Sankara, Ramnuja, Madhva, Vallabha, Nimbarka and Chaitanya are all Vedanta in its different forms. Even the Saiva and Sakta religions are a kind of Vedanta alone, in their own way.
8. A Guru is essential for one treading the spiritual path, up to a certain stage, as it is in every field of the educational process. Tentatively we may say that a person whom one regards as the best among all those one has seen or come in contact with in one's life may be regarded as one's Guru, until one comes across a

greater person whom the religious instinct can recognise by a spontaneous reaction.

9. Though mantras in Sanskrit have a special significance, we cannot say that a formula in some other language, charged with an ardent fervour of religious feeling, has not such an efficacy. The Sanskrit mantras have an additional advantage of semantic or phonetic structure, in addition to their capacity to rouse a religious feeling. Mantras in other languages are also effective.
10. Fasting and such other dietetic regulation, etc. have a disciplinary value, and therefore these are necessary. But they have no ultimate value as they are not the essence of the spiritual life.
11. Rituals in religion are not to be discouraged, for they are like the feet of the religion on which its body is supported. But the feet are not the entire personality and should not be mistaken for the same. The mistake is not in the performance of the rituals but in the overemphasis laid on their mere outer form as if it is the whole of religion. The legs are not the whole body, though the legs are necessary for the body in spite of the fact that they are not the essential parts of the body. As regards the extent to which rituals are to be regarded as essential, our explanations above will give the answer.

12. The *samaskaras* prescribed in the life of a Hindu are necessary purificatory processes. Our view on ritual is, again, the answer here.
13. The Karma-kandas of the Vedas in the section dealing with the necessity for ritual in the observance of religion, in one of its forms. Though every rite prescribed in the Kama Kanda of the Vedas may not have any significance, in the context of modern times, the essentials need not be neglected, at least where they are honestly felt to be helpful. All these peculiarities of religion require personal guidance from an expert and cannot be put in black and white in a generalised fashion.
14. Hinduism is a way of life. Hinduism is not a theoretical doctrine or merely an intellectual school of philosophy. Hinduism is neither a ritual, a creed, cult, faith, dogma, theoretical philosophy, or even a religion as a mere outlet for emotion or what the psychologists condescendingly call 'the religion instinct'. Hinduism is a name given to the very science of life, the art of living, and it is as wide, as meaningful, and as necessary as life itself. To the question, what should constitute the way of life in the present context, the only answer we can give is that the proper way of life is the ordering of one's thought, speech and action in accordance with the principles, a bare outline of which has already been indicated in the preceding paragraphs. Here, again, we should add that

the entire science of life, which Hinduism is, cannot be explained in a short article or essay. The standard texts already available on this subject, and the example of the Masters who have lead and are leading this life in their own persons, are the proper guides.

15. It is possible for all sections of Hindus – Advaitins, Visishtadvaitins, Dvaitins, etc. – to come together and form a single force that Hinduism really is. Why should this not be possible when the essential meaning of the rock bottom of Hinduism is properly grasped by means of right education?
16. We can confidently assert that the future of Hinduism is a glorious success in the fulfilment and materialisation of its values, as long as these values are in conformity with the law of Truth. For, Truth alone triumphs: *satyameva jayate*.
17. The steps that are to be taken in the direction of coordinating the essential values of all religions are, we reiterate, the steps towards right education. What right education is, of course, is a different subject altogether. And we do not feel it worthwhile spending time in writing a few lines on this subject which borders upon the deeper foibles of human nature, since a solution to this problem will perhaps have to be attempted by a collaboration of persons competent in this line, who have to come to a conclusion as regards the modus operandi here.

18. We do envisage a properly constituted approach of Hinduism in the Western countries at this junction of the atmosphere in this century. What is required is a band of experts who know what real Hinduism is, and not merely pundits and scholars with only an academic acquaintance with the fringes of Hinduism or even the go-getters in religion whose influence on the public mind is bound to be inadequate, sketchy, artificial and even commercial rather than truly religious or spiritual. With the concentrated force of stalwarts endowed with this special capacity, the spirit of real Hinduism can not only produce a solacing effect on the tension-ridden psychology of the West but also hold aloft the banner of the Universal character of Hinduism, not as a religion with its traditional connotation but as a comprehensive way of life.

19. There is no need for anyone to work upon the idea that proselytisation is necessary to instil into the minds of people consciousness of true religion. In fact, the system of proselytisation would imply a distrust in the value or efficacy of religions other than the one which the proselytiser professes. Since no religion can be said to be complete from all points of view or to represent every phase of Truth, it would be improper to arrogate the character of completeness to any religious faith so that it can consider others as standing in need of a transmutation into its own

make. Rather it is the duty of everyone really interested in the welfare of people to guide them on the path which they are already treading towards the One Destination which is reached by the many paths from many directions, instead of asking a pedestrian already on his way to retrace his steps or to discourage him by saying that all along he has been wasting his time by walking in the wrong direction. For, every direction is a direction to the Infinite, as every river finds, by its winding movements, its way to the ocean, into which other rivers also enter.

20. The changes that have been presently visible in Hinduism may be due to its contact with the West, or in the mode of the presentation of its contents, but not in the nature of these contents themselves. The *sanatana* or *samanyadharma* does not change, though the *visesha dharma* has to change in accordance with prevailing conditions, as was noted above. Perhaps, pedantic orthodoxies which stuck to forms rather than essences are giving way to a broader understanding and appreciation going hand in hand with modern scientific thinking and logical analysis of religious principles, a method of approach which may be said to have been inherited, to some extent, by its contact with Western culture. But, at the same time, it has to be added that the Western impact has tended to make the Hindu approach to life more academic, social and pragmatic instead of deepening or even emphasising its true spiritual nature.