

THE COMING OF A NEW ERA

by

SWAMI KRISHNANANDA

The Divine Life Society
Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh, India

Website: swami-krishnananda.org

Human progress through the march of history has been recorded by centuries in the documents of the Nations, and this history has given us a hint to the trend of events through the ages and the direction to which the aspirations of mankind seem to point. It has always been a struggle for existence and fulfilment of an ambition that became the incentive to historical activity, and empires had risen and fallen in countless numbers in this process of man's appetite and egoism. This striving for self-perpetuation and the fill of the ego has not resulted in any tangible success or satisfaction of the urges within him. Unfortunately the whole of history is observed to be a succession of 'ups' and 'downs' in human career and emotion, recording the intensity and the extent of the urges of man, but these have never ended in a conclusion of the play.

Millions of years have passed, as the astronomers and geologists say, since the earth has been created in this solar system, but all these years have been for man nothing but occasions for struggle and no achievement. We have been told that man gradually evolved from the Stone Age through the Copper Age, Bronze Age, etc., till he reached the present one which we are likely to regard as the pinnacle of human achievement. But, alas, we know too well today where we stand to be duped by any such encomiums as our being homo sapiens, as masters of the forces of Nature, and the like; for

we simultaneously know that men are today ready to fly at one another's throats at the earliest opportunity offered and mind not even an extirpation of life on earth. We are again in the endless historical predicament of struggle, the satisfaction of immature egoistic ambitions and uncultured conduct, which we are likely to attribute only to the cave man, the primitive aboriginal, as we would like to call him. May it be reiterated here that cultural advancement or the mastery which one hopes for does not consist in any overweening patting on one's back even when one is sunk in the quagmire of utter ignorance and stupidity, for culture is something finer and made of a better stuff.

Firstly, it has to be observed that if our aspiration is for any meaningful success or achievement in any walk of life or field of activity, we have to bring about a Copernican revolution in our ways of thinking. Instead of imagining that we are well off and up to the mark, on a surface evaluation of personal prejudice and social status merely, we have to turn our gaze in another direction altogether—the direction of real and not imagined peace. It is futile, on the very face of things, to work for any personal good and individual comfort alone, to the exclusion of the well-being of the environment in which we are placed. Selfishness can overcome bodily individuality and yet maintain its arrogance through the family, the community or even the nation. Family-selfishness leads to petty feuds in society, community-selfishness causes disturbance within the national set-up, and national-selfishness can bring about international wars. Since antagonism or battle is not the purpose of mankind's existence—for this would lead to mutual destruction and annihilation of the very purpose of life—culture, naturally, implies a rising above selfishness in all the levels of social existence, so that there is a mutual recognition and appreciation of the values, needs and aspirations of those other than our own selves.

Now, this regenerated appreciation is impossible unless the regeneration is already present in man. The bringing about of this inner culture would indeed be the opening of a

new era in the history of mankind, an era which had occasional opportunities in the passage of time to show its head as a possibility, but which never found full expression at any time. It does not mean that man had never been under circumstances of real culture since creation, for we hear of the glorious times of the rule of Sri Ramachandra, of the reign of Yudhishtira, and in later times, of Vikramaditya, and such righteous protectors of the prestige of man. But there were descents as there have been such ascents in the cultural history of humanity, and today, in this twentieth century; we find ourselves in a miserable situation when man is obliged to live in constant apprehension, anxiety, insecurity and fear of what may happen to him tomorrow. And why all this? Who is the cause of this fear and this feeling of insecurity? It is certain that everyone would announce, "Not I, but he is the cause." A very interesting position indeed! And this is the culture to which we have attained in the sunlit midday of this century.

But is there any solution? Is there any remedy? The solution and remedy has to be sought in one's own self, by each and everyone, for social and national existence is ultimately rooted in individual existence. As many drops make the ocean, many individuals make humanity. This boils down to the problem of the study of man. The peace of mankind is in man, and it will be evident how, as they say, man is the maker of his destiny.

"The proper study of mankind is man," said the great poet Pope. "Know thyself," said the Oracle of Delphi. "Atmanam viddhi," says the sage of India. To investigate the constitution of man is a dire desideratum now. When the needs of the constitution of man are known, his disease is dug out from its depths, and the proper treatment administered to him.

But the study of the nature of man has to be made by man himself. And who is to bell the cat? For the study of one man cannot be done by another man. This is the crux of the matter, and when one studies oneself it is easy to come to the

quick and pleasant conclusion that everything is all right with oneself and the wrong is with others. Now this is contrary to the true scientific spirit with which one has to work. No scientist can expect to have a correct discovery unless he sheds his prejudices and preconceived ideas; and this is all the more so in the case of a scientific analysis of the self. The structure of man is inextricably connected with the constitution of the universe, and 'no man is an island'. It is therefore not given to anyone to study oneself as ultimately cut off from the rest of the Universe. The Purusha-Sukta of the Veda proclaims the organic unity of Creation. As it is not possible to study the life of a limb of the human body by severing it with a sword—for then it would lose its functional relation to the life of which it formed a part—so the constitution of man cannot be studied by isolating him from the universal set-up of which he is a part. And this assertion of a non-existent independence of the individual is called egoism. Imagine how pretentious the ego is!

Man's peace, thus, rests on a community of feeling among everyone, which implies a mutual sacrifice among people. No man can reserve for himself all the pleasures of the earth that he craves for and yet except sympathy and help from others. The world rests on co-operative activity. "By mutual regard for one another, do ye attain blessedness," says the Bhagavad Gita. It is surprising that people hope for an achievement that is impossible when they strive for their own supposed welfare while at the same time working to cut the ground from other's feet. Let it be remembered that no selfish man can really be happy. The sufferings through history have been the sufferings by selfishness.

And this selfishness is grounded in the ignorance of one's own good. It is a pity indeed when one cannot be aware even of one's own good. And this is the condition of man today. There is no one to teach him, for he is not prepared to listen to anyone. Such is his audacity, because such is his egoism, and such his ignorance. Are we now ready to open our eyes and learn from our own experience that not to ride roughshod or dominate over others should be our aspiration

but to subserve a common good through obedience to a universal law? Economic, political and religious fanaticism has first of all to be abandoned if mankind is to be in peace. There is no point in crying, 'Peace, Peace,' and working for a war secretly. This hypocrisy is another phase of the egoism of man, which, by hook or crook, wants to achieve the end it vainly covets in its meanderings through the darkness of erroneous thought. People who come to power cannot easily avoid the craving for self-advertisement and being to some extent callous to the good of the community or society of which they are supposed to be caretakers. Titular heads may be good gentlemen, for they have no real power, and one who is confident that he is vested with power cannot, when his personal interests are involved, resist the universal temptation to close his eyes to decency, etiquette and honesty and go headlong in working for a fill of his ambitions.

Constitutional heads, who are chosen guardians of the welfare of people, and are expected to exercise power only towards the protection and proper direction of the land and people, are likely to go off their tracks and pursue purely personal ends, to the defiance of the trust which people have reposed on them. Power-intoxication blinds the eye and it cannot see reality even with effort. To it reality is what it sees, and it sees only the realm of its personal self. Nero in the West and Vena in the East are classic examples of this behaviour. The power-mad person imagines that the property he is supposed to take care of is his personal possession, and he can do anything with it. To trample over the importance of others and exalt one's own by announcement and advertisement of self, by rejection of the acts of others and substituting one's quixotic opinion of veto over all these, by issuing perpetual directives and orders to subordinates even when such action is unnecessary and unwarranted, and by finding pleasure in hurting others' feelings, is the characteristic of the power-maniac. He sees in himself an overlord of all things, and cringing instruments of his work in others. These are the dangerous consequences to

which leaders, heads and chiefs get easily led, when they become sure of their position and power. And these are the real threats to social and world peace. These are the evils to be circumvented before any attempt is made to work for the good of mankind.

People who sincerely wish to work for the eradication of these illnesses of the human mind find themselves often resisted and thwarted in their attempts. One's notion of perfection, either in work or in ideology cannot be implemented in practical life successfully, since, unfortunately, one's life is wound up with the idiosyncrasies and shortcomings of several others in the world. One may be a conscientious and efficient man of action, but one's move may be hampered by a rusted part in the machinery of the execution of the ideal. One may fret and fume that the part is not co-operating, but it does no good, because the part is essential for the machinery to start and move; and it will not move. Nor can one dispense with this rusted rogue of an essential for the machine, for to abandon it and then try to go ahead with one's enterprise is, for obvious reasons, impossible. You want to 'do', but you are not allowed. And there is a painful aspect of this situation which comes up when you are obliged to do a work while you are constantly being impeded and obstructed in your way by the non-cooperation or a morbid sluggishness of action on the part of certain other essentials for the fulfilment of the action, which, to you, is a bounden duty. Here you are likely to be at your wit's ends, and lose all the God-given patience in you. But losing patience is not fulfilling the task, and you cannot also do anything with it. Man either becomes reckless or bungles when so hard hit. It demands of one an uncanny spirit of understanding and self-sacrifice to be able to appreciate the seriousness of this perspective of life and to rise to an adaptation of oneself to the higher requirement of a larger reality. Non-recognition of this fact has, many times, thrown out well-meaning and sacrificing souls into the limits, and occasionally they had even to perish without achieving anything beneficial. Life is a difficult battle, and no

stereotyped ethics or beaten track of old routine can always be expected to come to one's aid in the struggle. A vital reorientation with a new spirit at every juncture may have to be brought to action with renewed ingenuity and self-adjustment every time.

Teams of such regenerated men are essential to muster in the forces necessary for achieving good. They can be made available through the smaller and bigger universities and institutes of right education, who have all to bear this in mind while planning the curriculum of training. If a feeling of mankind's brotherhood is the prerequisite of international peace and prosperity, let it be remembered also that this brotherhood cannot be achieved without universal love, and no such love is practicable without the recognition of the sacredness of life and an eternal value in humanity as a whole. This Eternal Meaning in life has been, since time immemorial, acclaimed as an absolute Reality present also in everything and everywhere in the Universe, for the realisation of which man unconsciously struggles by the daily drama of his life, and the Universe evolves stage by stage, never resting perpetually in any of its conditions and pointing at every stage to a reality above it. Here is a deep mystery and an amazing truth revealed to the wondering eye of man, for the sake of which he cannot but strain every nerve, and forgetting which he is veritably losing his own life. Here is a truth which everyone has perforce to find time to think, and which everyone has to realise today or tomorrow.