CHAPTER ONE

RELIGION AND THE SPIRIT OF RELIGION

"It (Religion) consists of two parts, 're' meaning 'again' and 'ligio' meaning 'to come together' or 'unite'. Religion, therefore, means to 'reunite with God'. People think of religion as a bundle of doctrines and vigorous do's and don't's. This is totally wrong. The sacred aim of religion is to remind people of their divine origin and lead them back to God".

Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba

"The sole object of anyone's search in life is happiness. Actually, it is only for the sake of attaining happiness that people do anything at all. But people are unable to find the true source of happiness. If it could be found in material objects, why do people remain unhappy after acquiring more than enough of such things? [.......] people do not experience any real inner joy when they depend on material things or on other individuals. Such dependence is their weakness",

says Mata Amritanandamayi in an interview with an internationally acclaimed documentary film director Michael Tobias during her 2001 June-July visit to the United States of America (Chaitanya 2001 : 2). These words of the Saint-Mother from Kerala (in South India) only re-assert the words of wisdom of great saints and apostles of God the world has seen, like the Buddha, Jesus, Mohamed or Nanak who pointed out
that certain values are more important than the material possessions and pleasures of life and that human life attains meaning and becomes worth living only for these values. If only man would adhere to certain "do's and don'ts" willingly, man could really prove himself the 'Crown of Creation'. He could then attain peace within and peace without. Today we recognise these 'prescriptions' as the different "religions" of the world.

Man lives at the body, intellect and mind levels primarily and all great religions cater to his all-round growth. At the first rung of religions the physical well-being is taken care of through cleanliness, general hygiene and good habits. The second envisages the need for domestic and social well-being so that co-existence, mutual help etc. can ascertain the safety, security and harmony needed for survival. Most of the basic rituals and ceremonies in any religion look forward to giving man the first two necessities - good health and social harmony - so that he can progress into the final rung of religion which caters to matters of the soul. All great religions underline self-discipline to streamline the process of the growth of man at all levels of his existence. Man is prone to taking for granted that what constitutes his religion is the set of rituals and ceremonies connected to it. Religion stops here for such a closed mind. The deeper realms of this third rung of religion are meant for the "spiritually awake".

The Encyclopedia Britannica would enlighten us with the information that ancient Greek and Latin languages held no word
equivalent to 'religion' as we understand it today. The nearest words we come across in these languages, are the Greek 'heira' (holy) and the Latin 'sacra' (sacred). This must be because the nomadic tribals then were still savage and had no comprehensive idea of a 'religion'. They were worshippers of a 'spirit' behind the objects of nature. By worshipping and appeasing these spirits the tribals expected 'security' and material prosperity bestowed on the devotee. Thus these spirits were 'holy' or 'sacred' to them. In the age-old Vedic religion, we come across the 'ṛta-devatas' (custodians of natural order) who could be not only worshipped but also propiciated; Agni (fire), Vayu (air), Varuna (water) etc. But that indeed was the beginning of man's religion. Man is unique in more ways than one, indeed. For all other living organisms, the field of awareness is largely, the external environment and to an insignificantly small extent, the interior of their bodies - 'the without' of nature. The awareness of the 'self' is almost exclusively a 'blessing' bestowed on man alone, as the 'subject of experience' along with awareness of non-self, as the 'object of experience' of both the within and the without of nature (Ranganathananda 1992 : 56).

Man has the opportunity to lift himself out of his animal nature which dictates sense-pleasure and sense-enjoyments alone as the end of life. His new-found self-awareness can help elevate himself from 'the human to the divine' with the help of his religion, if only man is willing to 'exploit' the great gift of this unique opportunity.
In this regard what is confirmed according to twentieth century biology has been discussed long ago in ancient Vedanta:

"SELF-AWARENESS, which neurology considers as the source of the dominance of man over all nature and which nature achieved through the evolution of the human cerebral system and which remains a minor and hazy pole of experience in the early stages of human evolution, is a new dimension of awareness containing tremendous implications, says Indian Philosophy, for man's future evolutionary destiny as much as for his philosophy of man and nature" (Ranganathananda 1992 : 56).

W.E. Hocking, the well-known thinker of this century emphasises the 'uniqueness' and 'great advantage' that a human being possesses on account of this gift of self-awareness, saying, "[....] of all animals, it is man in whom heredity counts for least and conscious building forces foremost" (Hocking ix - x). The well-known 'Theory of Evolution' of Charles Darwin deals with only 'biological evolution'. The evolution of the 'higher brain' lies well beyond this evolution. Highlighting the significance of this 'higher-brain' in the homo-sapiens, Swami Ranganathananda refers to the following line, "For mammals all, homeostasis meant survival ; but for man emancipation" (Ranganathananda 1992 : 42). Thus the spiritual growth of man is a confirmed fact with his varied ideas on religion, ethics, god, philosophy, culture, equality, fraternity, spirituality and a plethora of connected subjects. How the saints, apostles of god and seers the world over streamlined primitive religious thought can never be over-estimated. Here we are reminded of the following words:
"While the out and out materialist looks upon man as a body - a contribution of cells and the psychologist as an integrated body-mind, religion regards man in his essential nature as a Soul having the mind and body as its coverings or instruments. And a religious life, properly lived is, that which aims at the harmonious development of the body and the mind so that the Soul may be able to unfold its potential divinity spontaneously" (Yatiswarananda Undated a : xiv).

Darwin places before the world authentic evidence of biological evolution which, in the special context of man, gains 'elevation' as psycho-social evolution. With man this higher evolution takes over completely, as Chardin argues convincingly. Asking the significant question, "Up to now has science ever troubled to look at the world other than from without?", the eminent paleontologist, late Pere Teilhard de Chardin says:

"In the eyes of the physicist, nothing exists legitimately, at least upto now, except the without of things. The same intellectual attitude is still permissible in the bacteriologist, whose cultures apart from substantial difficulties - are treated as laboratory re-agents. But it is still more difficult in the realm of plants. It tends to the behaviour of insects or coelenterates. It seems merely futile with regard to vertibrates. Finally, it breaks down completely with man, in whom the existence of a within can no longer be evaded, because it is the object of a direct intuition and the substance of all knowledge" (de Chardin 1959 : 55).

In this context, it is also worth examining the following:
"From the living cell up to man, biological evolution was motivated by organic survival. But with the appearance of man, these become secondary and not primary; the primary motivation becomes fulfilment and evolution itself becomes, at the stage of man, conscious and deliberate and goal-oriented, unlike the blind processes at the pre-human stages. This revolutionary change is the result of the fully developed cerebral system in man, in virtue of which the evolutionary process itself undergoes a revolutionary change; what was organic evolution becomes psycho-social evolution" (Ranganathananda 1992 : 34).

This, in man, is evinced as

"growth in the spiritual dimension which finds expression in ethical awareness and social feeling to begin with, and finds, according to Vedanta, its consummation in the experience by him, of the infinite, universal and divine dimension of his individuality, the aatman" (Ibid).

What constitutes the story of culture and civilization in the human context is just this. Swami Yatiswarananda sounds relevant at this point:

"In the course of man's higher evolution, there arises in him a new yearning, the hunger of the soul. Because of this new urge, the aspirant is not satisfied with the finite and fleeting pleasures of life, physical and mental, but longs for the Eternal and the Infinite, which alone can bring nourishment and peace to his hungry soul. We notice this fact in some form or the other in the Hindu Seer, in the Buddhist Initiate, in the Christian Mystic as well as in the Moslem Sufi. All of them lose their interest for material pleasures and even intellectual enjoyments and with their entire being hanker after perfection and freedom, although the paths of
spiritual discipline they follow may be different in many respects" (Yatiswarananda Undated b: 1).

Thus, the hunger of the soul is the common factor and the motivator force behind the third rung of all religions. It can know no barriers of caste, creed, community, race or religion.

In appetite and behaviour, the earliest man was hardly human and remained an animal. The process of gaining control over himself, which is ever at work in man, humanised him in slow stages, leading to human cultures, civilizations and socio-political organisations in due time. Discussing the impact of scientific advancement and technological know-how on the thought process in the modern man Swami Ranganathananda points out how, many luminaries of the 20th century including J. Arthur Thomson felt that "at the end of his intellectual tether, man has never ceased to be religious" (Ranganathananda 1992: 17).

What the biologists describe as psycho-social evolution, is, to us, nothing other than what the science of religion calls ethical awareness and social feeling. These are but the by-products of the early phases of the spiritual awakening in man.

The stiffest hurdle to progress in this direction is man's ego which makes him believe that "the only right thing to be done by others is what he himself is doing" (Vivekananda Vol. II 1992: 43). All conflicts, among the followers of the various religions of the world and even within the
same religion leading to wars and crimes (like the Crusades of long ago or the Islamic Jihad or wanton terrorist acts in the name of one or another religion in more recent times) are merely the result of ego-clashes or territorial ambitions. History also has evidence of spiritual streams polluted by the selfishness of the very people who proposed to be their guardians and custodians.

In his famous Chicago speeches during 1893-94, Swami Vivekananda says he is convinced that the several religions of the civilized era of man on earth reveal three things as being basic and common to them all, irrespective of any other factor:

- The first is the realisation that ‘something’ in the body does not die when the body dies and this ‘something’ is the Soul.

- The second is the knowledge that above all beings and above nature is a Being, God, who is the Creator of all things created. And therefore, he is Eternal.

- The third and the very important point acknowledged by these religions is the idea of the perfection of the Soul.


Thus Swami Vivekananda strikes two key-note points in the understanding and pursuit of spirituality which is the end of every religion: Perfection of the Soul and the Idea of Eternity. The Idea of Eternity has been common thought with thinkers even in the Vedic times. The Vedas repeatedly refer to the Soul as eternal and immortal.
Thereafter, the idea found concurrence in other parts of the world too with other religious thoughts.

"The thought that something will end is a byproduct of relative existence. Eternity never ends. In fact, if you examine it, you will find that the idea that something will end is itself the basis of your ignorance. Therefore, as long as you hold that thought you will be tied down hard to this relative existence and will never wake out of it [......] relative existence is true only as long as you remain forgetful of the ultimate truth of your 'being' (Ashokananda 1993: 101-102).

As for perfection of the Soul, the New Testament admits man as perfect in the beginning and attributes his own actions the cause of a 'fall'. John Milton sings, at the opening of his "Paradise Lost" (Book 1).

"Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world and all our woe
With loss of Eden [.....] " (ll. 1-4).

The most ancient religion of India too describes the Soul as perfect at the beginning and that it is bound to be so for ever. According to a prominent school of Hindu thought,

"[.......] the soul in its true nature, which is spirit, is pure and perfect, but for some reason it becomes associated with the mind and the body, and such an association clouds its glory. Just as dependence on other people is a sign of weakness, because it is out of weakness that the desire, the necessity for dependence and the actuality of the dependence come, in the same way this association of the
soul with mind and body presupposes a certain weakness or lack in the soul" (Ashokananda 1993 : 14).

The same speaker, in a later context gives the Vedantic explanation for this 'lack' or 'weakness' of the soul: "It is through the influence of Maya that man seems to have lost his divine nature" (Ibid : 96).

God, once believed to be extra-terrestrial, and controlling man and nature therefrom, is not to be sought without for He is within man. Coming to grips with this Grand Truth is termed as 'God-Realisation' or 'Self-Realisation'. Jesus says, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is within us'. The Vedas of the Hindus proclaim, 'That thou Art' and 'I am Brahman (The Supreme Being)'. This age-old message of the Vedas, the first message of Christ and those of other great seers in many parts of the world thus boils down to the unity of all the religions of the world.

All great religions hold before man the ideal of perfection which itself is termed variously as Brahman, God, Allah, Tao, Jehovah and the like. And they all emphasise the need for moral purification of oneself and spiritual striving as inevitable to reach this goal. Swami Yatiswarananda elucidates how the essential unity among the religions of the world cannot be missed by a serious learner of religions or a true seeker of God in the summing up below (Yatiswarananda Undated a: 7-10).

- ZOROASTER a great reformer of the ancient Persian religion, gave the ancient religion with many Gods a monotheistic turn.
Ahura Mazda, the Supreme Being, the author of the Universe and its destinies, always wills what is Good, but it is opposed by Ahriman, the evil spirit. Zoroaster believed in the ultimate triumph of Good. He stressed good thought, good speech and good deed which leads to this triumph.

JUDAISM believes in the worship of one God - Jehovah, who revealed His Will to the prophets. He demands moral conduct from His worshippers. There is none beside Him; therefore man should keep his status. ‘Thou shalt love the Lord with all thy might’.

Judaic mysticism holds that man - made in the image of God - has direct access to his Heavenly Father.

CHRISTIANITY accepts both the Old and the New Testaments and emphasizes the necessity of a Mediator, of Christ, the son of God. ‘Be ye perfect even as your Father in Heaven is perfect’. ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart and all thy soul’. ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is no other commandment greater than those’.

ISLAM is a product of many influences, including Judaism and Christianity. It is the religion of submission to God. A Muslim is one who submits to God and accepts Mohamed as the last of all prophets of God. Mohamed’s living faith in God’s tremendous vitality, the revelations given to Mohamed by Allah are collected in the Quran. ‘Your God is one God. There is no God but HE, the compassionate and the merciful [...].All on the earth pass away, but the face of the Lord shall abide, resplendent with majesty and glory [...]. call upon your Lord with lowliness and in secret. Call on
Him with fear and longing desire. Verily, the mercy of God is nigh unto the righteous.

According to the BUDDHA, who was an agnostic, Truth is the highest reality and this Truth, called Nirvana or Unconditional Freedom, is to be realised by right comprehension, right speech, right conduct, right meditation etc. 'By the complete destruction of lust, hatred and delusion, devout men are no longer liable to suffering and are assured of final emancipation'.

Buddhism flowed to many lands including China where it blended with Taoism and Confucianism.

To LAO TSE there is one Real Being, who is called 'TAO', but the word is a substitute for 'the name which cannot be named'. Tao is the source of all things, omnipotent through non-assertion. Tao implies also the inner order of the Universe. 'Alone It standeth; and it changeth not. Around it moveth; and It suffereth not. Even if one has a little knowledge, he can walk in the ways of the Great Supeme'.

CONFUCIUS, the greatest humanist, based his humanism on moral life and conduct. He declared: 'The higher type of man makes a sense of duty the groundwork of his character, blends with it in action the sense of harmonious proportion, manifests it in a sense of unselfishness, perfects it by the addition of sincerity and truth . . . . . . . when offered an opportunity of gain he thinks only of his duty'.

What is called HINDUISM is a confederacy of faith, a commonwealth of religions. All schools of Hinduism believe, in some form or other, in the Atman, potential Divinity of
Man, in Brahman or the Supreme Spirit, in the ideal of Self-Realisation and in the paths of Yoga leading to direct spiritual experience.

Hinduism holds that all religions are paths to the Eternal Truth; all souls will attain salvation in due course, world brotherhood can be based only upon the Divine Principle but not upon any personality. The ideal is not toleration but acceptance of all paths as true."

A life in good physical and moral health, helping one another to prosper materially and spiritually, is thus, the central theme of all religions. The variations, and even the contradictions are but superficial and are meant to suit specific times and climes of their origin. Realisation of this great truth, leading to toleration, love and harmony the world over is the spirit behind religion - or 'Religion' (spelt with a bold 'R').

True spirit of religion or Religion could be likened to a huge high-rise mansion with several storeys and landings in between. All aspirants to liberation are, then, upward climbers with the top-stroey as their goal. Each one finds placement at a lower or a higher landing in this mansion according to the Religion in him. His religion helps elevate him if he is willing to be helped to higher storeys of the mansion. The various methods of worship, prayer, rituals, disciplines and "do's and don't's" prescribed by various religions, prophets and saints are the discipline needed for the elevation of the Soul. Such men of religion have also shown to the world that
"[......] goodness and virtue, faith and works, are necessary as a preparation, nay, as a *sine quo non*, for the attainment of that greatest knowledge which catapults the soul of man back to its source and to its home and restores it to its true nature, to its self-hood in Brahman" as Max Muller elucodates (Muller 1928 : 183).

Spiritual attainment is impossible without peace within and hence all great religions of the world inevitably carry the message of love, service and peace at every 'level'. A fine sample of how our various religions pronounce this message most unequivocally and in the simplest of terms for easy understanding is provided by Selwyn Burney and Dorothy (Champion and Short 1952 : pp. as below).

The HINDU scriptures state,

- This is the sum of Duty: do naught to others which, if done to thee, would cause thee pain" - Mahabharatha. 5, 1517 (p.15)

- Looking upon all beings as myself, in thought, word and deed is the best of all methods of worship - Srimad Bhagavatham. II, 29,19 (p.19)."

In SHINTOISM we are told.

- All ye under the heaven! Regard Heaven as your father, earth as your mother and all things as your brothers and sisters - Oracle of the Deity Atsuta (p.44)."

- Those who do not abandon Mercy will not be abandoned by me - Oracle of Itsukushima (p.45)
JUDAISM advises,

Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart . . .
Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge . . . . but
Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself - Bible,
Leviticus, 19, 17-18 (p.55).

The most beautiful of all things man can do is to
forgive wrong - Rokeach (p.56)

But I say unto you: deeds of Love are worth as much
as all the commandments of the law - Talmud (p.56).

IN ZOROASTRIANISM we find,

That Nature only is good when it shall not do unto
another whatever is not good for its own self - Do not
unto others all that which is not well for oneself. -
Dadistan-i dinik.94,5 and Shayast-na-shayest 13,29
(p.87).

These four habits are the principles of the Religion of
Zaratust; to exercise liberally in connection with the
worthy, to do justice, to be friendly unto everyone, to
be sincere and true and to keep falsehood far from
themselves - Sad Dar.65, 7 (p.88).

TAOISM Proclames,

For Love is victorious in attack and invulnerable in
defence... - Tao Te Ching.67 (p.112)
Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain: and regard your neighbor's loss as your own loss. - T' ao Shang Kan Ying P'ien. (p.112).

CONFUCIANISM points out,

- True Goodness is loving your fellow-men - Analects. 12.22 (p.135)

- The ways are two; Love and want of love. That is all - Mencius. 4. 1. 2 (p.135)

- Do not unto others what you would not they should do unto you - Analects. 15. 23 (p.136)

BUDDHISM tells us,

- Conquer your foe by force, you increase his enemity. Conquer by love and you will reap no after-sorrow.

- For hatred does not cease by hatred at any time: hatred ceases by love, this is an old rule - Dharmapada. 5-6 (p.173).

- Hurt none by word or deed, be consistent in well-doing - Dharmapada. 185 (p.173).

The CHRISTIAN dicta, very known, are,

- Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice. And be ye kingdom to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for
Christ's sake has forgiven you - Ephesians 4, 31-2 (p.207).

- In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my Brethren, ye have done it unto me - St.Matthew 25, 40 (p.207).

- And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? For sinners also do even the same - Luke 6, 23 (p.210).

In ISLAM we hear these said,

- None of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself - An-Nawawi (p.261).

- The law of life requires: Sincerity to God, severity to self, justice to all people, service to elders, kindness to the young, generosity to the poor, good council to friends, forbearance with enemies, indifference to fools, respect to the learned - S.Abdullah Ansari (p.263).

- Bitter things become sweet through love, copper things become gold through love - Masnavi (p.263).

Thus all religions clearly have a single aim - that of making their followers cultivate in themselves that refinement which alone can usher in for mankind happiness and harmony. The great religions and their prophets thus transcend all narrow bounds of caste, creed, religion and region. They speak the language of love, the language of the soul. Their
ways are for spiritual unfoldment and are of universal application. Their common priority is welfare of all. The first step in Religion then, is to let live, love and serve man, and imbibing this spirit needs great conviction, moral courage and religious zeal. Success comes in slow degrees and progressively. J.H. Tuckwell makes a very apt point in this regard referring to the spirit of the Vedic message "That Thou Art" thus:

"Here we have deeply laid the metaphysical foundation of the duty of loving our neighbour and acting towards him as though he was our self. Thou Art That - that is to say, there is a deeper inclusive Self in which you and He are One; and loving service is the note or sign of this practical identity" (Tuckwell 1929: 185).

Thus, the true 'spirit of religion' - not religion - begins as the principle of integration between man and man. It does not mean religion in the sense of creed, doctrine or ritual - and far less any scheme of an other-worldly salvation. At the highest rung, it is the end of all knowledge. It can thus be explained as the force guiding man in his spiritual progress from the very start, first giving him the right direction and thereafter accounting for each of his achievements though self-discipline and up several rungs of spiritual attainment till his final emancipation.

Love, advocated by all religions as seen above is the first step to begin spiritual progress. True love is purely unselfish and is inseparable from a spirit of sacrifice. Man 'sees' in due course that only a drop of the ocean of love that God is, comes to be in the earthly context of one's love for a kin, neighbour and every object put together - a shadowy semblance of Eternal Spiritual Relationship. According to Gordon
Allport the critic who once said, "God is at bottom nothing but an exalted father" (Allport 1950 : 8), the spiritual seeker realises, was pitiably hollow. The seeker has begun to realise that the Soul and God have not a glorified imitation of the earthly father-son relationship, but that it is, in fact, the archetype of which the human relationship is but a faint copy. And what follows thenceforth is a spiritual identity with all beings and their welfare.

Prof. Paul Deussen, the Vedantic Scholar of Germany, well-known for this illuminating observations has this to say here.

"The Great formula Tat Tvam Asi - Thou Art that - gives in three words metaphysics and morals all together. You shall love your neighbour as yourself because you are your own neighbour and mere illusion makes you believe that your neighbour is something different from yourselves" (Deussen 1984 : 336).

Prof. Max Mullar declares,

"I am myself not a mountaineer, nor am I altogether a Vendantist, but if I can admire the bold climbers scaling Mount Gowri Sanker, I can also admire the bold thinkers tolling up to the heights of the Vedanta where they seem lost to us in clouds and sky" (Muller 1992 : 21-22).

To sum up, all religions lead us to Religion which is that force which lends calm and peace to the mind and the power to make a happy transformation of one's ego-centric nature into the all beneficial cosmos-centric one. Lacking this, our (spiritual) lives could be like anchored boats which we keep rowing feverishly, wondering all the time why we
make no progress at all. All progress we have achieved, all that man can boast about would get reduced to naught, because wanting this, we would be wanting in everything worth possessing. It is with reference to this true spirit of religion or Religion which transcends all barriers of faith, belief and sentiment and which is the ONLY solution to almost all the problems faced by the world of man today that a sample from the works of the two poets is chosen for studying the nature of religious poetry, its etymology and ontology.