

For Truth: A Western Perspective

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AS FAR BACK AS WE CAN GO, even before the earliest written records, there is evidence that religion has been a key aspect of human existence. The mystery of birth and death and existential challenges have always moved mankind to reach out to something – someone beyond, in search of the meaning of life. ‘No one’ it is said ‘can understand mankind without understanding the Faiths of humanity.’

Faith:

What is religion? Is it only a belief in a Spiritual entity? Anthropologists describe it as a science of human behaviour, often in response to the hazard of life. Religion provides a consensual way of looking at the world, giving the individual a sense of purpose and meaning.

The theologian goes for a belief system, its utility, and purpose, its value and response of the people to such a system. The believer, then follows the doctrines so developed over a period of time, derived from the scriptures and their interpretation.

Thus the theologian studies the religion from within, with all its basic assumptions, to suggest that the faith is true. He attempts, more often than not to adapt the faith to changing times and situations. Rigid regimentation often makes it inflexible, shutting out other approaches to the search for the Divine than one’s own!

Cognition:

Every method of evaluation of religion adds on to our ‘total understanding.’ To the reduction theorist, we say that it is not possible to explain religion in one simple way: Marx explained religion in economic terms, with ‘exploitation as its dynamics, Freud applied the natural instinct of sexual desire as his dynamic. Charles Darwin diverted the thought process to his evolutionary theory.

Malinowski (1884-1942) abandoned the historical dimension, and believed that ‘scientific’ laws of culture could be applied to religion. The individual’s biological needs: of food, shelter, security and sexual instinct could be viewed as social needs, which people provide for corporately, through economic, political, kinship and religious institutions. The miraculous phenomenon came in handy, as it brought one individual into a leadership position in society.

Spirit of Religion:

Religion has – over the ages and across continents – made a positive contribution to the life or doubtless, it has also been responsible for conflict and bloodshed, in its negative manifestations. But, essentially religion helps man to accept himself and his living conditions, rather than falling prey to the infirmities of human existence. In that sense religion is no illusion, as Sigmund Freud would like us to believe.

Basically, then man projects all his ideas of existence and territorial loyalties onto a supernatural entity, called God. Such ideas are – in themselves – true, indeed they are necessary, to hold the society together as a cohesive moral community.

Thus the spiritual concept of Divinity and the moral code of a society, run hand in hand. The interpretation of the spiritual code, in varying social backgrounds, may differ to varying degrees – both geographically and chronologically, from age to age. From a moral viewpoint, religion is that mental state which enables man to apprehend - or comprehend – the infinite under different names, like Deus, in Latin, Deva – in Sanskrit, and Theos in Greek, which were related to the idea of provider or enlightener.

Max Muller (1823-1900) believed that the human beings' perception of something actually became particularized and got imbued with a nature of its own. In course of time, man had forgotten his given description and came to believe that the description was the Reality and the Power in itself, as in the case of the *Surya* – bright sun becoming a deity in its own right. As an Indologist he noticed how the sun is worshipped as *Devata* in India as a powerful force of Nature, or God in its own!

Guru Nanak had, in the 15th Century, ridiculed the practice of throwing water towards the Rising Sun, in the morning, to invoke its blessings for ancestors. The episode at Hardwar, of his offering Ganges water to his own farmlands in the opposite direction, had totally bowled over the Sun worshippers, who now saw reason in religion.

What language does God speak?

Philosopher Nietzsche (1844-1900) had no qualms – misgivings or sick feeling – calling his famous treatise “Thus Spake Zarathustra”. From Hebrew language, Joseph Heller in his *Catch 22*, describes some events, after which his hero began to waver in the lifelong trust he had placed in the wisdom and justice of an immortal, omnipotent, omniscient, humane, universal, anthropomorphic, English speaking Anglo-Saxon, pro American God.

Miles Kingston agonized over “the peculiar, even unsatisfactory, system whereby God never communicated directly with his chosen people, but preferred to give Israelite leaders an off-the-record briefing!”

In some minds, these comments might sow seeds of uncertainty over the way God moves in His mysterious ways, His wonders to perform’

India's Annadorai, DMK's Founding Father, rejected this concept. He demanded a switch in all prayers from Sanskrit to Tamil. “We will drive Sanskrit, God and religion as preached by Brahmins out to the North,” he declared. The simplistic reaction of the Brahmin priesthood was: “it would take away their bread and butter!”

The age-old rituals and practices to appease countless gods, conducted by the Brahmins had become a hereditary system that held sway for long ages – **until the advent of the glorious Guru Nanak. Devotion and reason became the two wheels of his religion.**

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