

Is Religion a mere Sentiment?

This means that religion is something not appealing to reason, or a something which is more a mawkish affectation than healthy ratiocination, a something emotionally imaginative, not a fact established by the intellect, a something which from the point of utility would seem to be superfluous, a something which man can very well do without. Have plants and stones religion, for example? Nor do we find animals troubling themselves about God or soul! It is man that somehow religion holds under its fascination. Why?

2. Looking over history, modern as well as ancient we find mankind have been swayed in its destiny by this one fact among others, viz: the religious sentiment. Whether it is a false sentiment or a sentiment based on reason, we shall see further on. But the fact remains that such a sentiment guided the wisdom of men, individually and collectively, in the home as well as in the nation. This fact stands as a protest against all those stray reasons, like those who belong to the school of Charvak or Augustus Comte. Whether the religious sentiment worked for weal or woe on the whole is another question. What we wish to lay stress here is that the sentiment existed as a fact among mankind and largely influenced them all times. If it exists not in stones, plants and animals, reason should not get offended if it exists in man. The very fact that it is in man or at least suspected in him shows that man is on that very account differentiated from mere stone, plant or beast. Man may thus be called a religious animal. That he is so cannot be gainsaid. Why he is so is certainly a mystery? It is no use contending that we might do very well without religion, but who will listen? In spite of the preacher of *No-religion*, man yet *wills* to be religious! He is made up of that as one more part with other parts; singling him out from his neighbors in creation. A clever man of intellect may call it superfluous another of reason dub it as non-utile, and yet another seer sentence it as false but still that man insists on having it as his birth-right is a fact that cannot be ignored. In spite of my omniscient (?) reason to exclude the religious sentiment, the sentiment or whatever be it, clutches on mankind with as fast a hold as ever, in times when there were only savages, as well as in times which boast of philosophers. If the savage sends his love to a fetish, the philosopher amorously contemplates on an immanent something, though both the fetish and the something share the common feature of ever eluding grasp. Curiously too, sometimes this spirit (or ghost of God), seems more tangibly present to the undoubting fool than to the doubting metaphysician. Why?

3. Sentiment is feeling, emotion, a craving and leaning of the heart towards a something which it has not heretofore possessed and which it longs very much to possess. It is a desire springing from the heart, betokening that we are not content with what we have. Emotion as well as intellect both characterize man. The blunder made is when intellect is allowed to dethrone emotion, or emotion allowed to usurp the place of intellect. Imagination seems the handmaid of both emotion and intellect. If then we concede that everything has its uses in the economy of nature and that each, emotion, intellect &c, has its part to play, and that religion has its roots both in intellect and emotion, and that religious sentiment is an existent or even a suspected fact then it is evident that either to call it false, or superfluous or

Is Religion a mere Sentiment?

non-utile is simply to call it as each one's fancy may suggest; but all the same it is an undeniable fact that it works as a potent agent among mankind.

4. Those who would support reason alone and divorce emotion, - are they satisfied with their estate of reason? Unfortunately not. Any writer may be selected, and it would be easy to detect in his writings many a strain of dissatisfaction, at once a disproof of the position which he tries to assume. The writer too can be detected as tired and disgusted with the conditions in which he is placed or in which he would place himself. In trying to harmonize his whole being with the rule of reason, he finds for himself that he is out of tune with his emotional nature; and unless and until both the strings of his harp are put in harmony, the music of his being will be found to produce discord.

5. If then emotion is a part of our nature, what constitutes religion, if it has its roots also in emotion? Again, as intellect is a part of our nature, and if religion has also its roots therein, what is that intellectual religion? We have thus two: emotional religion – which is a sentiment (?) – and intellectual religion, accordant with reason. But what is religion to begin with? Religion is that which concerns itself about finding out the existence of an Unseen power to which all nature as a whole is subordinate; from which all nature is evidently derived &c; the finding out the relation in which man stands to that Power; the duties arising from out of such relation; what is it that man aspires for; who and how are his aspirations granted; under what conditions the great Power grants them; whether man has an immortal part in him (the soul) &c. The intellect which employs itself in finding out this kind of knowledge constitutes the intellectual religion. While this is the case, emotion will not keep quiet. When the intellect points or endeavors to point a Higher Being ordering guiding, loving the universe, naturally a feeling arises in man, a feeling of reverence, of humility, of love &c towards that Being. With this feeling is combined the aspirations of man desiring for a better kind of state, and a different arrangement of things, than where he finds himself at present, - aspirations longing for a permanent order of things, - aspirations stimulated by the feeling of dissatisfaction with the fleeting conditions encompassing him, and disgust with what is found to be pregnant with pain, suffering, disease and death, surrounding him. The strange combination of aspiration and reverence (or devotion) is what constitutes the emotional religion. Religion is thus a real sentiment, and is based both in reason and emotion.

6. As regards religious sense in man, there is a strange interaction between intellect and emotion* [* As I write, I happen to find an echo of my thought in St. George Mivarts' New Psychology (P. 263. Nineteenth Century, Feb. 99). "We always 'feel in' in 'thinking,' and we mostly also. 'think' in 'feeling'."] No philosopher can entertain dreams of higher knowledge unless he had the prime motor of feeling behind his intellect. The feelings for the Unknown are, as for example in the saints, found much stronger and deeper than the feelings which arise for things known. Saints are peculiar beings. They behave strangely from the worldly man's stand-point, and so are worldly men strange in the eyes of the saints.† [† Cp: Bhagavad Gita, Ramanuja Bhashya (Engl. Transl.) II-69: 'Yamisa sarva-Chutanam &c..'] The peculiarity of these developed saints consists in, their emotion for the Unknown raised to the highest pitch, whereas they are trained to have no feelings of attachment &c. for worldly affairs; whereas the worldly men are quite the reverse. The feeling is in the background even before intellect.

Is Religion a mere Sentiment?

All the work of the intellect is really performed by emotion – though unrecognized – pervading it. And yet we see as far as the visible world is concerned, that knowledge – earned first by the intellect – precedes emotion. Our eyes first see a beautiful object, then we love it. Our ears catch a sweet song wafted in the air. The mind lovingly lingers on the strain intuitively. We see a rose, and the nose likes to smell it. The flavor of a dish persuades the nose to commend it to the tongue and so on. Here the knowledge of the thing is first. Then comes emotion for it. But strangely afterward emotion *represents* knowledge to the mind; in other words the experience of a previous knowledge engenders desire; and desire stimulates for further knowledge of the thing once known. The religious sentiment however is emotion for a thing Unknown; and emotion practiced and developed culminates in the knowledge itself of the Unknown. That emotion precedes knowledge, is illustrated by Sri Bhagavad gita informing us of Lord Krishna telling Arjuna:

‘Who I am, and what I am, in truth, *knoweth* man by *devotion* (or love). After knowing Me what I am in truth, entereth he into Me!’ [* Read the Engl. Transl. of Sri Ramanuja Commentary on this verse: XVIII – 55: “*Bhaktiya Mam Athijanate*” &c. – By *devotion* (i.e. emotion) comes My (God’s) *knowledge* &c.] Here *knowledge* of God comes *after devotion*. Devotion is a sentiment; and a false sentiment of religion it would be if it were not rewarded with a *knowledge* of God. Ordinary intellect, like that of a philosopher has a vague feeling behind it stirring it up to search for the Unknown. Intellect proceeds a certain length, and finds a *cul de sac*. Here again emotion steps in and take up the task, and finally man succeeds in obtaining a knowledge of the Unknown not possible for the intellect alone to obtain. As in the world we have to *see* a thing before we can *love* it, for heaven we have to first *love* it before we are rewarded with its transcendent *sight* itself. That we are justified in searching for the Unknown is proved by the religious sentiment strongly rooted in human nature. All history tells us of this fact, and our own experience at one time or the other, amid the ups and downs of life, attests to it.

7. Whether religious sentiment has worked woe or weal to humanity is another question. The utilitarian would say that if it has worked woe, it ought to be left alone; if weal, it may be admitted. But the utilitarian will find after running his eye over the annals of man, that to our restricted vision it has done both weal and woe. If religious sentiment has safeguarded life, and promoted peace, then it is a useful thing certainly. But if it has done both, like all other pairs of opposites, in the world, it is a necessary thing and is half of it certainly good for the world. That it is wholly good beyond the world is a question beyond our human judgment but it is so is an assurance given us by all saints. Then its woe in this world is translated into all weal in the other. Besides if religious sentiment implies a High Power, with the attribute of omniscience, then our judgments on universal events are short-sighted, and we do speak like children. And if the object span of human life is nothing before eternity, to confirm our judgments to a single life’s events and seek for causes of effects in that short span, is sure to land us in doubts and errors.

But if events of a life are activated to a previous life, and as germs of a future life, the omniscient God and His doings are justified to our mind.

Is Religion a mere Sentiment?

8. We wish for immortal life, we wish for eternal bliss, we desire everlasting peace, - all in strong contrast with the mortal, ephemeral, and turbulent nature of our present surroundings. The religious sentiment constitutes that wish. *Nolence volence*, it permeates our nature. It makes us to look up, it directs our contemplation to a Power with whom lies the ability to fulfill our wish, it modifies our conduct in life so as to compass for us the ultimate end, of peace and bliss. The sentiment is so woven into our nature that we cannot shake it off unless our nature itself be changed from human to something else.

9. A hope for the complete amelioration of our imperfect nature and finding it in perfection is implanted in the human race; and in the economy of things, a hope that is implanted is destined to grow, develop and manifest into fruit and flower. It is implanted that it may find its fulfillment in a definite Goal. Indeed religion is no more than a mere sentiment if its object is chimerical. But if its object is the highest and the greatest that one can conceive, is the resting place of our immortal hopes, it then is really a serious matter. The sentiment becomes the real business and purpose of life to carefully nurture and cautiously develop, so as to finally lodge it in the Object of its search, - God, the Lord of the Universe.

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