

Coherence of Religion, Spirituality and Science The Eternal Enigma of Belief: A Critical Elucidation

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ABSTRACT: Often perceived as similar and even more often, as same, the fundamental and mysterious principles of life, Religion and Spirituality are very closely related. The inception of science remains unknown although both spirituality and religion, have always been defined vaguely by the inhabitants of this universe. When, Who, Why, Where and how all of it started, is much of a mystery. Although there have been many such efforts to find a rational explanation; theories, experiments, sacrifices and life times spent, unfortunately have only been able to disorient them. A few came up with amorphous elucidations, but never with a proof or material evidence. This paper aims to bring out the coherence of religion, spirituality and science, trying to find the roots of confusion between religion and spirituality, using science as an engrossing approach. This dissertation also tries to expound the basic definitions of spirituality and religion and interpret their significance in the contemporary world, directing towards realising the idea of universal harmony and oneness.

Keywords: *Belief, Spirituality, Religion, Science, Culture, Harmony.*

I. Spirituality - A brief Delineation

Spirituality is something that is perceived differently by people in distinct contexts and situations. All those explorations that began in search of an answer, ended with a realization that it is merely impossible to define spirituality, but a person can only circumscribe around the origins of the ones that prevail among the world's doctrines of spirituality. Spirituality is considered to be something that is centered around creation and hence, a creator; who is often referred to as god, recreation, salvation, life and its very purpose.

The body and the soul are two different entities, the prior, perishable; while the later, eternal. This notion finds endorsement from phrases in the Bhagavad Gita, that illustrate the concept of creation, its iteration and the immortality of the soul. "Wherever the beginning of creation is mentioned, it just marks the beginning of a cycle. Your body shall meet with death, but your soul will never" says the Gita.

Taking this impression forward, the preceding question would be, if there exists a creator who governs the creation, destruction and recreation. This paves way for another undefined dogma: God. God is one such point, whose discussion or an argument, both, start with questioning his very existence. Ancient mythologies and historical chronicles claim that nature, along with its diverse and tremendous powers is the manifestation of the presence of a supernatural substance, termed God.

However, the belief is also that the introduction of the concept of God, was a system established by the early denizens inhabiting the world, to set conventions and jurisdictions, which they asserted to be supervised by God, for the human kind to lead a systematic life, culturally and socially with harmony and rest, while contemplating about the purpose of life and salvation. In the words of Rabindranath Tagore, “Man becomes true if in his life he can apprehend god; if not, it is the greatest calamity for him.” [*The Realization of the Infinite, an essay from Complete Works of Rabindranath Tagore*].

Tagore claims that God and the human are not separate institutions, although the human beings’ organisation is finite and bounded. Realising the supreme in self is the ultimate aim of life, he adds. Quoting him from his renowned book, *Geetanjali*:

*“I shall ever try to keep my body
Pure, knowing that thy living touch is upon all my limbs.
I shall ever try to drive all evils away from my
heart and keep my love in the flower, knowing that thou
hast thy seat in the inmost shrine of my heart”*

[*Geetanjali*: Verse 4]

Tagore accentuated through many of his writings that god does not expect the humans to devote their lives towards illogical rituals, instead he stands by one who works with dedication and competence. This is inferred from a quote of Tagore himself: “God seeks comrades and claims love, unlike devils who seek slaves and claim obedience”. On the contrary, in contemporary connections, God is exemplified only in religious contexts and is often subjected to personification, especially in a few widely practiced religions. God is misinterpreted as one who does miracles and is depicted to be a mystical prodigy.

Next in the array of such propitious, yet deceiving components of spiritual understanding, is Salvation. One of the oldest religions in the world proclaims to pioneer the idea of salvation, which, according to it, is *Moksha*. There have been many terms with similar references: *Vimukti*, *Nirvana*, *Kaivalya*; purported to have closer connotations, although each of these terms differ in the origin as well as significance in specific and different from exact definition of salvation.

With accord to the ancient mythologies, *Moksha* refers to the forms of freedom and release from the epistemological cycle of *Janma*(birth) and *Mrityu*(death). Attaining the state of *moksha* is considered to be liberated from bonding and suffrage, realizing the supremeness in oneself with a state of knowledge and beatitude. This is supported by the following lines from *Vivekachudamani*, a compilation of poems, assumed to be written by Adi Shankaracharya.

*“Beyond caste, creed, family or lineage,
That which is without name and form, beyond merit and demerit,
That which is beyond space, time and sense-objects,
You are that, God himself; Meditate this within yourself.”*

- [Vivekachudamani: V.254]

The Bible bestows similar thoughts on salvation and asseverates that preservation, freedom or deliverance from pain and losses, from sins and its consequences. The following excerpt from the Bible strengthens this view.

*“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,
neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor
depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us
from the love of God.”*

- [Romans; Chapter 8:38-39]

II. Religion: A Confound and an Obscure Pursuit

In similitude with spirituality, the definition of Religion too, is intractable. Religion is basically a pursuit of interest complemented by great devotion associated with belief in a superhuman power, who is said to hold control over the creation. With the knowledge of spirituality and its constituents, the very existence of religion could be questioned for purpose. There have been many such questions, but seldom has anyone asked, Why should one be practicing a religion and why has it actually come into existence.

A possible tincture of explanation would date back to the early ages, where not all people were educated enough to understand spirituality, life and sciences behind the do's and not's of the daily routine. But, it was essential for those who were learned, to impart the same into their ham-handed peers.

A nineteenth century German school of thought, namely, '*Religions geschichtliche Schule*', depicted religion as evolving with human culture. Studies could hardly find a precise demarcation to religion, but could aggregate their findings as follows.

The knowledgeable had to convince the others and proclaim the facts by some means. So they chose to create an entity, a form of existence that would be acknowledged by everyone around. The slight intervention of a pigment of the human imagination, soon gave it features and physical forms. And hence, a supreme power came into being. Through various social groups, this supreme power gained discrete, disparate and unprecedented attributes, and more interestingly: an idiosyncratic physiognomy.

Each of these facets earned a eccentric name and a belief; in different sectors of people, and in the name of such supreme powers, practices that were not commonly accepted in the name of science, were being followed for the better of humanity. These beliefs gave rise to variant and resolute opinions and practices, which were later termed as 'religion'. What came after this conjecture, was not all sought after. While few people found peace and tranquility in this juncture, the others sought the differences that it created, in rather tempestuous manner.

III. Religion and Spirituality: Congruences and Contrasts

Although Religion and Spirituality emerge from the same foundations, claims that one is 'spiritual' but not 'religious' have lately become common. It is exceedingly difficult to realize the mutual independence of these terms, however, both of which are not exactly the same. Considering the thoughts and proposals of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Tyagananda insinuated that spirituality is something beyond the frontiers of religion.



“For a long time I resisted and even ridiculed the idea. After all, the word “spiritual” is derived from the word “spirit,” and isn’t that the domain of religion? Is it possible to have any idea of “spirit,” or the conceptual framework in which it can be located, without the help of resources found only in religion? Does a religion that has no place in it for “spirit” deserve to be called a “religion”? Lately, though, my resistance has dwindled. It now seems to me that while religion and spirituality are connected, it may be possible to distinguish them. While religion without spirituality is still unthinkable to my mind, I am now willing to concede that spirituality does outgrow the defined structures of religion.”

- [Swami Tyagananda; *Vedanta*: Monthly Readings. 2010.]

With time, the real purpose of a supreme power and religion lost its meaning amidst people's opinions and personal interests. What is remnant of the belief today, has turned into fears and wishes. Fears that force them into religion, into an otherwise sally retaliation into their lives; a result of defiled and inimical speculation of people. Wishes with streaks of hopes for miracles within potency of religion; also, a result of defiled and inimical speculation of people. Swami Vivekananda strongly opposed this violation to the very fundamentals of religion.

“They had better lose it then. The man who is frightened into religion has no religion at all. Better teach him of his divine nature than of his animal.”

[Swami Vivekananda; Complete Works: Lecture on *Religion and God*]

It is important for the human kind to be reminded of the true purpose of this all, the veritable motivation behind the creation of religion; To make the world and the society a better place.

The rationale behind the credence of God, was to make people distinguish among the right and the wrong, so they can live a healthier and a positive life.

“They also seek to win favour from these superior beings, to get by gift of the gods what ought to be earned by personal effort. On the whole, this shows that the world is expecting a miracle. This expectation never leaves us, and however we may try, we are all running after the miraculous and extraordinary.”

[Swami Vivekananda; Complete Works: Lecture on *Religion and God*]

One of the fabricated consequences of religion was the inception of idol worship. The belief of a supreme power, being incarnated in a physical immortal structure; A Divine Physical entity came into existence not long after the concept of a creator came into place. Psychology speaks of how the human mind, rather acknowledges the presence of any life form; physically than in any other form. In relevance to the same, citing the example of pecuniary assets of a man, he would feel more secure and reassured, if he feels the presence of the money around him, than just a virtual number that flaunts the same, stored in banks or any other monetary repository.

Analogous to this, the existence of belief as well is apposite. Belief had always existed since the inception of God, but giving it a new stance through a physical form of a deity brought about a sense of safety and assurance, and reinstated faith in a more substantial manner.

IV. Pluralism of Belief-A Mystic Persuasion and Need for Harmony

The basic projections of all historic evidences that prove the origin of religions and faiths have converged to the idea of belief. Belief, that the superhuman power, God, is his saviour, the protector, the monitor, the light and guide, the path for success and the ultimate truth. Interestingly, the ways and conducts of expressing beliefs became diversified over the ages. While the underlying connection of belief and its significance remained the same, each of such distinguished belief associated itself to a religion or a group governing rituals and practices. This enlarged the scope for difference of opinions and led to contentions among religions, whose centre is the pluralism of belief.

The basis of belief is the same, the way one expresses or experiences it, differs. Artless of these considerations, there have been many incidences in the near past, that led to conflicts between the people on the basis of their religion and belief, calling the fundamental tenets of human civilization and intelligence into question.

All religions profess the same, but in different fashions, with different approaches under different circumstances and contexts. This was strongly advocated by Swami Vivekananda and we find many of his writings inclined in the same direction.

“By the study of different religions we find that in essence they are one.

There are differences in non-essentials, but in essentials they are all one.

The proof of one religion depends on the proof of all the rest the same foundation principles taught by my religion were also taught by all religions.”

- [Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda - Volume 1: Soul, God and Religion]

Diversity has been one of the beautiful characteristics of the creation, while unity in diversity remains essential and equally admirable. All the differences and persisting confusions among religious groups did not exist from the time of their inception, but are rather created due to lack of knowledge and understanding of each other's common grounds, and also because of selfish desires of ignorant anti-social entities.

One, who practices a certain religion should be ready to know what the others say and be wise enough to grasp the fruitful essence from them. One should understand the need to evolve the sense of acceptance, not just tolerance.

The unity of religious beliefs is directly in connection with the perception of ultimate reality. Paths taken by individuals, affiliated to distinct religions, might be different, but the goal remains the same. All that is required at the moment is the realisation of the innate spiritual unity of faith by the entire mankind, and establish universal harmony and oneness.

V. Evaluative Analysis on Scientific Approach to Religion and Spirituality

The compatibility of Science and Religion is a subject of continued debate. Examining the extent of Religious beliefs being conducive to science is challenged by a few religious canons that inevitably pose obstacles to scientific inquiry.

Stanford University's interdisciplinary research in the field of "theology and science", aimed to answer these issues by understanding historical and contemporary interactions between these fields, providing philosophical analyses of how they interrelate. This research acclaimed that one must be clear in distinguishing between Religion, Science and Spirituality in order to compare and contrast various peculiarities in each of them.

To distinguish between science and religion, science concerns the natural world, whereas religion concerns both the natural and the supernatural. Rational explanations do not appeal to superhuman entities: gods, etc., or to any such unnatural forces like '*karma*' or '*moksha*'. For example, neuroscientists typically explain our thoughts in terms of brain states, not by reference to an immaterial soul or spirit. However, it is not impossible to describe spirituality and religious beliefs in scientific perspectives.

Among the notions and rituals that are often implemented and strongly believed by those who follow a religion, it is seldom that you find a person who knows the reason behind practicing that very ritual. People are often blinded by faith, which, even though might be for a good reason; if overdone, could bring them in harm's way.

Consider the example of the most common beliefs of a common man in daily life. Few people take the *VastuShastra* (The traditional system of architecture originating from one of the ancient religions) so seriously, that they dismantle newly built houses just to meet the 'Vastu' Criterion. For example, "The main door must be in the east, The kitchen in the south east, The bed facing west", was to ensure proper ventilation since there were no fans and other mods of air circulation.

"The bed must not be placed under the pillar" was because there was a danger of the pillar falling and hurting the ones beneath it. Apart from Vastu, other restrictions such as "Not cutting finger nails in the evenings" existed because of the lack of artificial light, and the sharp nails hurting the feet, if spread all around the house.

Despite not knowing these reasons behind the practices that they blindly follow, not many are ready to question the same. Today, what the authenticity of such notions and beliefs should be, is left to further and deeper thoughts.

Dr. Larry Dossey, an English writer professes in his book '*One Mind*', which is based on how our individual mind is a part of a greater consciousness and why that matters. In the words of Dr. Dossey, "We can recover the sense of sacredness, not just in science, but in perhaps every area of life. I used to believe that we must choose between science and reason on one hand, and spirituality on the other, in how we lead our lives. Now I consider this a false choice".

Rabindranath Tagore also added to these claims and notions. He explains the connect between scientific theories and the essence of spirituality as quoted below.

“The man of science knows, in one aspect, that the world is not merely what it appears to be to our senses; he knows that earth and water are really the play of forces that manifest themselves to us as earth and water - how, we can but partially apprehend.”

- [Tagore-Realization of the individual to the universe]

Tagore, in a conversation with Albert Einstein, an eminent Scientist and Nobel laureate explicated the cross correlation between Science, Spirituality and Religions. Speaking about the isolation of the divinity and its disguised affinity to science, Tagore answers a question by Einstein as cited below.

EINSTEIN: Do you believe in the Divine as isolated from the world?

TAGORE: Not isolated. The infinite personality of Man comprehends the Universe. There cannot be anything that cannot be subsumed by the human personality, and this proves that the Truth of the Universe is human Truth.

I have taken a scientific fact to explain this: Matter is composed of protons and electrons, with gaps between them; but matter may seem to be solid. Similarly humanity is composed of individuals, yet they have their interconnection of human relationship, which gives living unity to man's world. The entire universe is linked up with us in a similar manner, it is a human universe. I have pursued this thought through art, literature and the religious consciousness of man.

VI. Conclusion

Universe is the prime manifestation of unity in diversity. Any derivative of it, Spirituality, Humanity, Divinity, Religion or Science, has to abide by the axioms of nature. It is vital for every individual to realise this and recognise that all the ideologies existing, however variant they might seem to be, in their delineations and decorums, will finally converge to the base of truth: Harmony, Love and Contentful Living. One should broaden the mind by being ready to accept and respect the faiths of others, while standing firmly by what he is benevolent to and believes in. For, the Globe is now just a mere village, with the invasion of Science and Technology, which might possibly attain the status of a new religion in the future, not too far from now.

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