

The Emergence of a World Religion

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I thought of speaking to you, first, of the great difference between the world of thought today and the world of thought as it existed in previous ages with regard to religion; then to ask the question whether the next step forward is to be of the nature of a synthesis, a building together, or whether there will be an effacement of differences, rather than unity amid diversity; and then to see if we can find any clue to a plan which the world unconsciously has been following both in its religions and in its civilisations, a plan that man does not make out unconsciously carries out, as a great temple may rise under the work of the builder, the painter, the sculptor.

Just as we know that behind that rising temple, with its multitudes of workmen, there stands the architect who planned it and marked [Page 6] Indian people. It was the way among the Hindus that — provided the authority of a sacred scripture, the four Vedas, was admitted, provided the social order was obeyed - the intellect was left absolutely free. Within that great circle of Hindu faith you might have a dozen different cycles of thought, but — provided that all paid their reverence to the Veda (although afterwards they might go along their own road), provided they kept to the social polity and did not go outside its order — in every religious matter intellect was left utterly and completely free, and within the great pale of Hindu faith every philosophy was allowed to flourish, every school of thought was recognised as within the faith.

You find when you look to other faiths the same thing to some extent is true. If you come down to the time when Imperial Rome sent her eagles over the then civilised world, you find that those eagles spread their wings over a multiplicity of faiths, and when persecution began against the Christian faith it was less as a new religion that Rome raised her sword against the Christian than against those who would not bow down to the Emperor and pay him divine honors as head of the State; rather as a traitor to the Imperial rule than as a heretic did Rome strike at the Christian. It was the uniqueness claimed for Christianity — it was the refusal to recognise [Page 7] the Emperor among the Gods — that in Rome made persecution rise against the Christian, regarded as a danger to the Imperial rule.

With regard to the other nations of the past the same was true. But now if you look at those religions for a moment, not as belonging to their nations, but rather as what each religion is in itself, what do you see gradually emerging from that mass of opinions, from that vast jungle of faiths? You see certain doctrines emerging which are common to them all. The unveiling of the records of the past by antiquarians and archaeologists, the study of ancient faiths and the literature that they have left behind them, has made in our modern days a consensus of educated opinion that there are doctrines common to all the great religions, coming up time after time in the story of the past and suggesting a common origin for them all. It is not, however, on that that I want to dwell at the moment, but rather on another fact which has not been as widely recognised — that while it is true that every religion contains a small number of universal teachings, every religion also is dominated by a spirit peculiar to itself. As you look over the world's religions this comes out strongly, and it is one of the signs of the plan whereof I Spoke.

Every religion has its own note, its own special characteristic, and the whole of them do [Page 8] not sound out a monotone, they sound out a splendid chord, when all are heard together. Take the religion of

India, and take its characteristic not from me but from a Christian missionary who lived, I think, some forty years in India, and knew well the religion of the country and the hearts of the people — Dr. Miller, the well-known Presbyterian, who founded the Christian College of Madras. After his retirement, writing some three years ago to the college that he founded and built up, to the Hindus who for so many years had been his pupils, he used one remarkable phrase. “Remember”, he said, “what the Hindu religion has given to the world; it has given the Immanence of God and the Solidarity of Man”. Those two are really sides of one great truth. Admit the universal life living in all around us, and the brotherhood of man is only the earthward side of the great spiritual reality; the two must ever go together; and that, Dr Miller said, is the great note of the Hindu faith.

Pass on to the religion of Zoroaster, and ask what is its special contribution to the thought of the world, and you will find there rings out the note of purity. Good thought, good deed, good word, that is the triple statement that every Parsi makes every day as part of his daily devotion, Purity of mind, purity of heart, purity of action; that is their special contribution, [Page 9] and purity that goes through every part of life. You must not pollute the earth, the water, the fire; these elements are to be kept pure, otherwise man's physical life inevitably becomes polluted; and one knows how much in our modern life's welter that note is needed now. No Zoroastrian would pollute a stream. If Zoroastrians were living here the streams that go through Manchester would flow as pure and as bright as when this was only a village. That was the great note of the Zoroastrian faith, that man must live a pure life amid pure surroundings.

Coming westward from Persia, what was the note that Egypt sounded in her religious life? It was that of science, study of man and the world around him, and of finding in the higher worlds the realities of which down here we have the shadows. And so thoroughly did Egypt follow science that your very name of chemistry is taken from the name of that land of Khem, the land of science of the past; so deeply did she mark her name on her favourite subject of investigation.

Passing from Egypt across to Greece, though but a little space divides them physically, how vast is the difference that divides them intellectually! Where Egypt spoke of science, Greece spoke of beauty, and worked the beautiful into the lives of her people as no nation has done before or since. Beauty was a lesson to her whole [Page 10] population. The beauty of Greece was not a beauty in closed galleries only, of pictures and statues veiled by walls. The beauty of Greece spoke in architecture, in statues open to the masses of the people; and she understood, as England does not yet understand, that beauty ought not to be luxury of the few, but the common bread of life for all mankind.

As Greece spoke of beauty, Rome spoke of law — the greatness of the State, the might of the people as embodied in its government and representatives. Rome thought little of the individual; she thought of the nation; the State was the Roman ideal, and the citizen was law-abiding because, save where law is omnipotent, no true freedom for a nation may exist.

Then when you spring back from Rome and Greece, the parents of modern civilisation, there rises up in India another religion, the great religion of the Lord Buddha, and the note of that was knowledge; right thought was the keynote of his teaching. Coming westwards again you find the Hebrew, the note of whose religion is righteousness, the doctrine of a righteous Lord who loveth righteousness; and in the bosom of that the later religion of the Christ was born. What is the special note that Christianity gave to the world? First, the value of the individual, which the older nations of the world had not [Page 11] recognised to the same extent. They built their civilisations on the family. The family was the unit, not the individual. Christianity struck the keynote of individualism, and it was in order that that might be fully and thoroughly developed that some of the earlier doctrines for a time were submerged in Christendom.

The great doctrine of Reincarnation (taught in the primitive church, and now reappearing in our own days) dropped for a thousand years out of Christian thinking — wisely and well, as all things are when you see them in the right proportion and the right perspective — for it was necessary to build up the

individual, and the idea of but one life, upon which everything depended, gave to the individual an activity that he might not have if he thought that many lives stretched before him and behind him; and the need of exertion built up that idea of individuality necessary for further progress. You look around and you see the evils of individualism; look a little further, and you will see also the good. You cannot build a house without bricks, and you cannot build an international community until your individuals are developed and have grown strong and mighty.

But there was another note in Christianity not thought of so much at first, but now beginning to make itself clearly heard. For while the [Page 12] idea of one life and of an everlasting heaven and hell stimulated well-nigh to madness the value of the individual soul, there was something else than that doctrine: there was the example of the Founder, and that sounded the note of self-sacrifice, which will in time become the dominant note of Christian nations. For if it be true, as it is true, that Christendom has made the individual more than he ever was before, it is also true that with strength comes the duty of self-sacrifice, and the magical example of the Christ gradually trained the noblest spirits into a desire to emulate the sacrifice they saw.

So in Christendom today, imperfect as it is, you find more of altruism than you do in any other national of the world. I speak what I know, for I have travelled in many lands, and often have I told my Indian friends: Your want of public spirit, your want of patriotism, your apathy in the face of wrong — in those things Christendom is ahead of you, and not behind. While in many points of spiritual living India is greater than England, in the sense of public duty, the duty of the man to oppose evil, to protect the helpless and to sacrifice himself for the miserable, in that England is beyond India, and in knowing that strength means duty and not oppression.

When we thus look over these religions of the [Page 13] world so hastily, what is the outcome? That everyone has its own note of music, and each one is different; that though each incarnates one life, one love, the mode of expression differs, and the difference is a gain, not a loss. There is not one of these that you can afford to lose, not one of these dominant keynotes of the many faiths that you can leave out of your coming world-religion. You must take from India her doctrines of the Immanence of God and the Solidarity of Man; from Persia her teaching of Purity; from Egypt Science, which is part of religion, and not against it; from Greece Beauty; from Rome Law; from the Hebrew Righteousness; from Christianity Self-sacrifice. Which of these jewels of the faiths can you do without, when your world-religion emerges?

The truth is that all the differences due to differences of mind, differences of temperament, tell one great truth — that spiritual truth cannot be transmitted by the intellect in its perfection. Only the Spirit in man can realise spiritual truth. The intellect grasps phenomena, and reasons upon them to principles; the Spirit intuits the Spirit, and knows itself at one with all, and all your religions, all the religions of the world are the intellectual presentments of the one great spiritual truth. The intellect is like the prism which splits up the white [Page 14] sunlight into its constituent parts; all of them are in the white light, although not visible there till it has passed through the prism, and all the beauty of the world comes from the differences, all the colors of the world are born of the whiteness of the sun.

The differences is not in the sun, it is in the differences of constitution of the various things on earth that have color, and that makes the beauty of the world. The blue sea, the green meadow, the colors of the flowers, all the exquisite shades which ravish your eyes with their delight — all take their colors from the one white light, taking some for nourishment, and throwing out the rest for beauty; and so the world is clad in colors, although the one light is white. So is it with the spiritual sun. There is one Sun of Truth that shines through every religion that has guided and consoled humanity; but each has taken the part that it needed, and thrown the rest out, like the rainbow which makes the sky beautiful because every drop reflects at a different angle and not all at the same. And so the religions of the world are all wanted, for each reflects the light along a different line of the many colored glory of the world-religion, which shall be taken from the diversity of world-faith, synthesising them all into one. [Page 15]

That is the first point I want to leave clear and distinct. Unity and uniformity are not the same. The life is one, but the splendor of the world depends upon the diversity of forms. Why, what is evolution? The protoplasm becoming plant and tree, animal and man; and the greater the difference the greater the amount of the divine light that shines through all. That life is so full, so rich, that it cannot body itself out in a single form, and only the totality of the universe can mirror the divine image. In multiplicity, then, not in uniformity, lies the richness and the beauty of religion, as of all else there is in the world; and the world-religion will not, I believe, wipe out the differences between faiths, but blend them all into one.

There is not very much power, perhaps, in the scale of notes that you play on a piano one after another as you run up the keys, but if the notes are well chosen and blended together with the magic of a Beethoven or a Wagner, then the musical chord swells out, the grander, the more moving, the more the notes that the magic of the master has blended into a single chord. When the world-religion emerges it will not be this religion or that, one religion or another; it will be one great chord of harmony, swelling up from humanity together, in which every note is perfect, but on their [Page 16] union into a chord depends the splendor and the force of the whole.

Let us now consider what are the conditions that would make the emergence of the world faith possible. Clearly it was not possible two hundred years ago. All the different religions were each shut in within its own little ring-fence, knowing nothing of the other religions of the world. How much did Christendom know of the great Eastern faiths two hundred years ago? Many things have contributed to make the change. First of all, the progress of science in making means of communication easier and swifter. When it took you months to travel half-way round the world a man went and settled in a new country, made his home there, lived and died there. But when communication is easy, when you can run across to India, from London to Bombay, in less than fourteen days, as I did only a few weeks ago; when you see the means of communication becoming swifter and swifter, it is inevitable that the men of different faiths should come into contact with each other, and learn each other's thoughts and ways.

When I was a little child they used to issue missionary maps in which the different lands of the world were painted according to the color of their faith. A bright yellow, symbolical of light, was painted over the countries that were Christian [Page 17] and black, symbolical of darkness, over the whole of the rest of the world. They called the blackness heathendom and the bright spots Christendom, and it was a little depressing to the childish mind to see how much larger heathendom was than Christendom. Then they thought their faith unique — the one revelation. But now men are wiser than that. Not so long ago an Archbishop of Canterbury, speaking in Exeter Hall to a number of assembled missionaries who were going out to India, told them to remember that they were going to a country that had its own scriptures, its own philosophy, its own faith, and that they must not forget that all scriptures were God-inspired — although he naturally thought his own the most inspired of all.

When an archbishop can speak like that, when in the very act of sending out missionaries he bids them to remember, as St-Paul said many years ago, that God in many ways and divers manners spake in time past by the prophets; when people begin to recognise that prophets are of no one nation, but of all; when people begin to understand that scriptures belong to every religion, and not to one alone; when they realise that in the divine kingdom there are no aliens and no outcasts, but that in that great household all are in their father's house; when that begins to dawn on men — and it is [Page 18] dawning on the flower of humanity today in every nation — then the conditions become possible for a world-faith as they have never been possible before; and one understands that perchance the feeling may spread which is voiced in one of the ancient scriptures of the Indian people, where in the person of Shri Krishna the supreme God is speaking, and when He declares; "Mankind comes to me along many roads, and on every road that a man approaches me, on that road do I welcome him; for all roads are mine".

That is a great truth. Go to the centre, the religions are all on the circumference, and as all the radii lead to the centre so all religions lead to God at last. What is needed is not that we should convert each other,

but that each of us should deepen and spiritualise his own religion, and find out its value for himself. As that spirit spreads, as men more and more realise that all have something to learn and all have something to teach, as that idea spreads over the civilised world, surely the emergence of a world-religion becomes possible.

But more than that is in our favour today. I alluded just now to antiquarian and archaeological research, to the labours of scholars, to the study, oriental and occidental, everywhere proceeding. Out of all that research and all that scholarly [Page 19] investigation the truth has emerged that I mentioned — that there are certain great doctrines believed everywhere, at all times, by all peoples, which we find in all the religions of the world. That is true Catholicism. The doctrines believed always, the doctrines believed everywhere, the doctrines believed by all. And why the true Catholicism? Because it is the testimony of the religious consciousness to the communion of man with God.

In the last century, as you know, at the time when science seemed to be building up an impregnable materialism, Professor Huxley and many of those who thought with him took the name Agnostic to describe their intellectual position. The name was quite significant. Translated, of course it sounds absurd — without knowledge — seeing that it was taken by scientific men, men who certainly were not ignorant. But everyone knows what it means: "Agnostic", "without the Gnosis", and the Gnosis was not knowledge in general, but knowledge of a particular kind. Professor Huxley said that man had two means of knowledge — the senses whereby he observed external phenomena, and the reason by which he considered those phenomena and drew conclusions from them. Those, he said, were man's two means of knowledge, and the only ones that he could see man possessed — senses to observe, reason to understand. But the [Page 20] Gnosis — that is not known by the sense, it is not reached by the intellect; it is the knowledge of the Spirit by the Spirit, and that was said to be unknown.

Now look, anyone of you, at yourself, or at human history as a whole. Clearly you have a body and senses, emotions and a mind; have you nothing more? On the answer to that the future of religion must depend. For every scripture is at one in this idea, that neither can the senses see nor the reason understand the Spirit which is life universal and eternal. Do you not find anything within you beyond senses and intellect? Has there been no moment in your life when you felt that there was something more than that? History shows us that what is called the religious instinct is the most widely spread and the most persistent of all the testimonies of human consciousness.

That is one point that you must consider when you are thinking of the agnostic position. All that you know depends on the testimony of consciousness. That is the deepest, the surest, within you. Your senses may deceive you; they tell you the sun rises and sets, when it does nothing of the kind. Your reason also sometimes misleads you, for it has not data enough on which to work, and the conclusions of the reason must depend on the perfection of the data on which [Page 21] the conclusions are founded. But both from great intellects and small, from nations of every type and kind, the testimony of the religious consciousness has arisen and arises still today. Are you going to trust consciousness in everything else and refuse its evidence here? Can you ignore that universal testimony from the oldest ages down to the present? It is from that — that testimony universal, immemorial — that religion springs.

Religion is the search of man for God; that is its real meaning. And what is interesting is this, that when you go beyond the senses and the reason you go beyond difference; for the testimony of all the mystics to religious experience is the same. The Indian Yogi, the Roman Catholic saint, the Protestant devotee, all have the same experiences and speak with the same tongue. They differ in ceremonies, beliefs, outward things, but in the region of the Spirit they speak one language, and not the babel of the crows that you hear down below. If you are inclined to throw that aside you have another difficulty which arises before you: that the men whom humanity most reverences, the men to whom humanity most looks up, are the men whose religious consciousness has spoken the most clearly and the most decisively.

Conquerors come and go, Kings rules and perish, statesmen appear and disappear, but the geniuses [Page 22] of religion endure from generation to generation, from age to age, holding the homage and the veneration of humanity. What conqueror of ancient or of modern times, what mighty King, what genius of a statesman, dare you put beside the Buddha and the Christ as types of the supreme humanity? Their crown is immortal, it does not fade; their empire is continual, it does not pass away. Millions upon millions in every generation do homage to the greatness of those two. I do not raise as to them any religious question; I do not ask whether they were more than man; but I say that among all the men that humanity has produced, whose names are remembered, there is none that approaches those mighty two in the reverence and the love of countless myriads of men. There, again, is a testimony to greatness of the religious kind.

Now for the first time it has become possible for us, looking over the world, to see that all the great teachers were animated by a single spirit, and the great truths, as I said, were one and the same. But then comes another question: If this be so, how will you get rid of all the differences about which they raise controversy: By trying to raise men from the intellectual ground to the spiritual consciousness where all men are at one. That is the answer. The world-religion cannot be dogmatic; it must be what is [Page 23] sometimes called mystic. What do the two words mean? I am not one of those who, in the study of religious history, are inclined to throw contempt and scorn on dogma. I believe it is necessary at a stage of religious evolution as at a stage of education. A dogma is only the statement of a truth, or what is believed to be a truth, imposed upon a person from outside. He is taught it by authority; it may be the authority of a book, a man, or a Church — it does not matter; it comes to the man from outside and demands belief.

That is true in science when you are learning it. When you go to the laboratory, to the school, to learn science, you are bound to learn by dogmatic statements. The expert in science says such and such is the truth, and if your boy won't accept it for the time, he will never make much progress in his scientific research. If he wants to be an entire freethinking in the laboratory, he is likely rather to go to pieces. If he says: "I cannot take anything on authority. I am not willing to take it on the testimony of someone else that if I combine nitrogen and chlorine there will be an explosion!" Well, if he tries he will find it out for himself, but he will have to record his experiment in other worlds than this. You must have dogmas, you cannot help it for a time; but that which the student learns through dogma [Page 24] he finds out later by his own experiment, and then only does it become knowledge. That which you are told is not knowledge; you may repeat it, but you don't know it; and the very object of all education is to train the student from the dogmatic stage to the stage where he knows by his own reason and his own intelligence.

So also with religion. In the childhood of the soul, in the boyhood of the soul, dogma is necessary for its training and the objection to it that is heard on every side is largely the objection of ignorance, not realising what it means, nor its place in the long evolution of human consciousness.

But there is a stage where dogma must give way to knowledge. The belief of the mystic, the knowledge of the mystic is not the acceptance of a truth imposed upon him by authority from without, but the recognition of a truth that arises within him, and compels his obedience. That is what the mystic is; the man who sees truth. Your need is knowledge; but what is the condition of knowledge? That you can modify part of yourself to answer to that which comes to you from outside. You see only because you have ether in your own body, and the ether on the retina on the eye can be thrown into vibration by the waves of [Page 25] light waves of ether, and you see because you can reproduce. The same is true of all your senses.

You only know of the outer world that to which you can answer from within yourself. Your hearing, your smelling, your tasting, your seeing, your feeling, are all through modifications of your body, which has learnt in that part to modify itself, to answer to the vibrations that come to you from outside. There are millions of vibrations that beat up against you, and you know them not, because you cannot reproduce

them. To carry on the analogy — for all the world is really one — the man who has developed within himself the spiritual nature can answer to the spiritual vibrations of the universe, because he can reproduce them within himself

That is the condition of knowledge — when the God within you answers to the God without you, then and then only have you reached the Gnosis, and then only can you *know* that God exists. You cannot demonstrate Him by the reason; you can only make a probability. You cannot see Him by the senses. “Not in the eye resides his form”, an Indian scripture declares; but the Spirit in you which is part of Himself, a spark from the eternal fire, a seed from the eternal tree, that knows the source whence it comes; and when the Spirit opens up, then only God is known. If you seek Him within rather than [Page 26] without, if you sound the depths of your own nature instead of looking only at the outside nature where least of Him is seen — then, when once you have found Him within, you will see Him everywhere outside, and then none can shake your belief, for it is knowledge and no longer hearsay.

There is the testimony of the mystic, there is the place of the world-religion. It will impose no dogmas from without; it will evoke answer from within. It will seek to develop the spiritual nature, and know that truth is believed the moment it is seen. The great blunder of religious people has been that they have used swords to recommend their truth. Truth wants nothing but its own appearance before the Spirit of man. If you are shut up in a dark room into which the sunlight does not penetrate, although it is bathing the house outside, should I say to you: “You shall be cursed because you deny the sun?” Or should I say: “My brother, come outside the house and see where the sun is shining?” That is the nature of truth; you only want to know it, and you must believe it, and you must know it for yourself. When the world-religion has emerged, then every man shall find in himself the power to know, and therefore the spiritual consciousness.

Never try, then, to impose from without a belief from which another man shrinks. The [Page 27] moment he has risen to the place where it is visible, that moment it will shine out before his eyes. We cannot do much in this for others; we can tell them what we have experienced, what we know; but man must know for himself, for only then is the knowledge sure. When you have reached that you will know that every stage has its own place, its own beauty. You will not complain because the child-souls still find picture and symbol the way in which they best can realise the divine. You will understand that every teaching has its place, every religion has its work, but that a religion to be world-wide must be greater than man, otherwise some will escape it, and it must be all-inclusive.

My last word to you, friends, is that if you desire the coming of such a world-religion, which shall lay the basis of a civilisation of brotherhood and bring about universal peace, then you must begin within yourselves rather than without. As we deepen our own spiritual nature, as we find out one truth after another for ourselves, as we realise what we are — Gods in the making, growing into the perfection of the divine image — as we recognise that, we are laying the bases of the world-religion; and that which can never come by argument, by controversy, by intellectual reasoning, will come when the heart of love within us has awaked the [Page 28] spiritual nature. For love is deeper than intellect, love is greater than intelligence, and the love nature and the divine nature are so closely blended that the man who loves his brother will not be long ere he loves God.