

The Place of Religion in National Life

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Friends,

[Page 1] If I tried to say what is the place of religion in National life, and if I answered or defined that position, I should certainly say that its place is everywhere. No religion is a true religion unless it permeates the whole life of a man, and a Nation cannot be called religious unless it be inspired in the whole of its activities by religious feeling, religious thought, religious action. But that very general definition would hardly meet the views of those who have come here to listen to something more precise, although really not more accurate. I want, if I can, this evening, to try to show you to some extent not only the necessity of religion in the life of a Nation, but also something of what history has taught us of the effect of religion on National life. Some of you may remember reading, with relation to the want of religion, a rather interesting, because a very significant sentence of a great writer: "The times of atheism have always been civil times" — times of peace, times [Page 2] with small excitement, times in which the life of a Nation was running smoothly though perhaps somewhat sluggishly for if we look widely at history, we shall see that, when a Nation has become very wealthy, very prosperous, very luxurious, then the intellectual and the spiritual elements in that Nation tend to become overborne by the physical and the material, and so we notice in history that those "civil times" of which Bacon spoke, and which, he said, were characteristic of atheistic thought, have been times followed very shortly by National decay.

Nations growing over-wealthy and over-luxurious tend to lose acuteness of intellect, and still more to lose the keenness of spiritual insight. It has always been said by the great religious teachers of mankind that it is necessary for spiritual progress that a man should be self-controlled, that he should be abstemious as regards the luxuries of life, that he should be master of his body, and not permit his body to be master of mind and spirit. There is always a danger when things go too easily with a Nation. As a poet once said, "when wealth accumulates, men decay". A certain amount of hardness is wanted in the development of a healthy National life, and one who studied this side of man with some care put a curious proposition, which is by no means without a kernel of truth. Speaking of war, and saying, rather rashly, not being a prophet, that we were not likely to have much war at the stage of civilisation that mankind has reached, James said that Nations would require some substitute for war, that war brought out qualities of [Page 3] courage, of strength, of endurance, of power to resist hardship and to live without the luxuries of life; and what, he asked, in a civilisation which tends to grow soft and enervating, can we have which will take the place of war as a strengthener of man? He went on to point out the possibility that voluntary poverty might take the place of war — not the forced poverty that ruins the body, makes weak the will and breaks the heart, not the miserable poverty that we see around us in every civilised Nation, but a voluntary choice of a simple and non-luxurious life, a poverty embraced, as a great Christian Saint embraced it, voluntarily undergone and not compulsorily endured — James thought that that might take the place perhaps of war, after war had become impossible for civilised people, and that it would supply the mental stimulus which, goes with a simple and abstemious life, and prevents the luxuries of life from tending to

mental spiritual, and even physical decay.

Looking then at that historical fact, we have seen that with the decay of thought and the decay of religion, a Nation tends to become over-luxurious and so strikes the knell of its own coming death. We may look around the European civilisation and see that this terrible outbreak of war has perhaps rescued Europe from being over-luxurious on the one side, and oblivious of the terrible and brutalising poverty upon the other. It has made a call to many of the higher qualities of self-denial and self-sacrifice, the giving up of all that people say makes life worth living, and to the great ideal that [Page 4] makes man feel that he has risen above the animal, that there is something greater than physical life, something nobler than physical enjoyment. So we find, looking at religion, that it is essentially an aspiration to the higher Self. The essence of religion, that which is common to all religions, is the aspiration of the heart towards God, the searching for God and God's answer to the searching. Looking at human nature, we find that the thirst for God, as one great Hebrew writer called it, is an integral part of the human constitution.

Many people, mistaking what religion means and seeing the quarrels, the controversies, the hatreds, the strifes that have risen out of it, say that we should be better without religion, and that we should throw religion aside, for it breeds mischief, dissension, quarrel and hatred. But it is useless to say to mankind: "Throw religion aside". Man is so constituted in his inner nature that there is an inextinguishable thirst within him which nothing but the knowledge of God can satisfy. For a time, it may be, especially in youth, he is easily satisfied with the outer things of life, but when the difficulties of life have to be met, when the laws of life are experienced, when sorrow wrings the heart and disappointment breaks the courage, then it is that in man awakens the thirst for God, and it was truly said by St. Augustine that "man can never find rest until he finds rest in Thee". That was once put very beautifully by an English poet, George Herbert, who was mystic in his thought, quaint in his poetry. He put [Page 5] his thought long after St. Augustine, and he threw it into poetical form:

When God at first made Man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by;
Let us (said He) pour on him all we can —
Let the world's riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.

So strength first made away;
Then beauty flow'd, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.
When almost all, was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone, of all His treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay;

For if I should (said He)
Bestow this jewel also on My creature.
He would adore My gifts instead of Me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature,
So both should losers be.

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness;

Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
 If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
 May toss him to My breast.

The thought there is at once beautiful and true. Man's progress is made by disappointments. Just as a mother coaxes a child to walk by holding up some glittering object so that the child strives to crawl and then walk to reach it, so does God play with His children. God dangles in front of them some shining object. "Come", He practically says, "and take this toy", and the child strives after it and exerts its strength in striving: it is wealth, or power, or fame, or pleasure; but whatever it is, the only value of it is in the effort to reach it, and not in the holding after it is won. A man becomes wealthy, [Page 6] but his wealth burdens him; he finds pleasure, but pleasure cloyes him; he grasps power, and he finds his pillow full of thorns; he seeks satisfaction in one thing after another, and everything breaks to pieces in his hands, and turns, like the fruit of that fabled tree in Milton's Hell, into ashes in his mouth; and then at last, after many disappointments, having gained value of the striving in the development of his mind and in the power of his emotions, then at last, wearied with all worldly toys, he turns to God alone, and finding in the divinity within him the power of answer to the divinity without, then and then only is his aspiration satisfied, and he finds his rest in Him who is verily himself. And so all the great struggles of man, whatever they may be, are really struggles to find Brahman, who is bliss. He seeks happiness: he does well; it is a true instinct although his methods are mistaken; inasmuch as the very heart of the universe is love and joy, inasmuch as God is love and God is bliss, that yearning after happiness felt by every child of man is really an aspiration after God; that is an impulse to progress, that is a spur to all true endeavour; and so the very essence of religion is the motive power of evolution, and a Nation, as well as an individual, can only progress by the power of the Spirit within. That is true of religion as a whole. Any special religion has its value in its partaking of that aspiration after God. If you take the separate religions, then you will find that in a Nation's life, the religion by which the Nation has been [Page 7] built up stamps its civilisation and guides its polity.

Look over the great religions of the world, as we have known them in the so-called historical times, and you will find that each type of civilisation differs as the religion on which that civilisation is built gradually shapes and moulds it to its own likeness. If you take Hinduism, the oldest of the Âryan religions, you find that the whole of the Hindû polity is built up on its religion. The whole of the mighty civilisation of the past is the outcome of its religion. You have not only the Vedas and the Upanishats, showing a mighty intellect and giving you a splendid philosophy, a marvellous spirituality; you have also a set of books that you know as the Dharma Shâstras, the law which lays down the conduct of the people and gives a definite line of evolution which the people should follow. Similarly, you find that side by side, penetrated with the religion, you have the knowledge, the science of the old Hindûs. You find that within the six great Darshanas, and four of them are practically given to science. If you take Sâñkhya, Patañjali, Nyāya, Vyākaraṇa, what have you there but science of the deepest and the most splendid description? Some of you may have seen that remarkable book by Brijendranath Seal on the science of the old Hindûs, on which I am writing in New India. You find in those conceptions of Sâñkhya, conceptions of modern science precisely, definitely and accurately voiced, with a depth of understanding, of power, of abstract thought that has never been [Page 8] outdone in the modern world. You find the very foundations of modern science laid down there as part of the philosophy of Hindû antiquity.

Of all philosophy, the ancient Hindû told us that all philosophy has for its end to put an end to pain. Ask any of the great philosophies what is its object? "To put an end to pain", is the answer; and then there comes another significant verse, that you might as well try to roll up the ākasha like leather as to give

happiness to man without the knowledge of God. So you find that, whether in philosophy or in science, this mighty Hindû religion has moulded Indian life, has inspired Indian thought, has stimulated Indian action; for you must not forget that I have not time to dwell upon it in any detail, not only with regard to religion as such, but also the right conduct of man, as politics. Some of the other books dealt with the constitution of States, with the relation of the citizens to the State, and shaped and moulded the lives of the people; and I do not know that anywhere, in the ancient or modern world, you will find a single religion that so touches human life at every point as Hinduism has done, whether in the conduct of the individual or as shaping the larger life of the Nation. In Hinduism, as in another Eastern faith familiar to you — the religion of the Hebrews — you will find that all that was wanted to make the life of the people healthy and happy came to them with the authority of religion. You know it so well with regard to your own religion. You know how often the laws of sanitation, of hygiene, of cleanliness, of [Page 9] being scrupulously careful with water, with food, and with drink, and so on, come in as part of the religious duty of man. It was the same with the Hebrews.

I do not suppose that you have studied very much the old laws of Moses, but if you have, you will find that in those laws, meant for the guidance of the Hebrew Nation, are laid down particulars of the daily life of the people that may often remind you of the laws laid down by your own great teachers. To a man of the ancient day, there was no division in life between religion and the whole life of man. If he was healthy, his religion taught him how to become healthy. If his town was sanitary and well looked after, he was obeying the precepts of his religion that came to him with that external authority. The difficulty you will have in reading the Mosaic books, is that they are mixed up with crudities, because the Jewish Nation was not in those early days a highly educated nor an artistic Nation. You will come across phrases so curious, and occasional comments so immoral, that you are apt to overlook the value of the other parts of the Mosaic teachings. There are some absurd statements, some immoral statements as regards women; others made a duty of persecution: if a man did not follow the law of the Hebrew deity, then he was to be slain. Those are blots that belong rather to the nature of the people, I think, than to the teachings of their Prophet, just as you will find occasionally in the laws of Manu phrases which are impossible to accept as coming from the real writer of those valuable laws of a Nation. All ancient books are [Page 10] subject to that difficulty. You must use intelligence in reading them, and you must learn to discriminate between the words of the Sage and that which is very often the gloss of a later commentator who, in order to serve the purpose of the moment, wrote into the original manuscript something which was useful for the time, as he thought, but was utterly out of accord with the ancient teaching that he injured and lowered in the minds of the thoughtful.

You may turn from Hinduism and take other religions which, one after another, had a National life based upon them. The second great religion that followed on Hinduism, going further west along the border of the Mediterranean, in Egypt, Cyprus, *etc.*, was a religion peculiarly scientific in its nature. The Egyptian religion was based on the knowledge of the physical world and of the physical body of man. Very much of your own Hatha Yoga is closely connected with a similar form of Yoga among the Egyptians. They studied the body of man in relation to the body of the universe, and found out the relations between the parts of the human body and the larger parts of the great organism of the solar system. Those of you who have studied the deeper thoughts of Hatha Yoga will find that the line of thought and practice is familiar in many of the Tantras. It almost seems as though Hinduism were the parent religion of the religions of the West, as the Âryan ethnological stock is the parent of all the emigrations that went out westward. You find in that Mediterranean and Egyptian civilisation one more type of civilisation [Page 11] moulded entirely by the religion of the people. You find the Science that made the precision of Egypt the marvel of the world, and made their priests able to perform so-called miracles, which were simply the

utilisation of some of the generally unknown laws of nature to produce results which, as it were, convinced the ignorant, not by appealing to the mind, but by dazzling the senses.

When you turn from that to the better known civilisation of Persia, you find there in the religion of Zoroaster the essential characteristic of purity underlying everything, a civilisation largely based on agriculture, on cultivation of land, and side by side with that, a similar development of astronomy and astrology, so that all agricultural operations, as is also seen in India, were arranged on astrological calculations, and the beginnings of every great season of the year were marked by festivals of the planets, the sun and the moon. Right through that civilisation this idea of purity runs, and of the relation between the planetary bodies and man. You must be pure in thought, in word, in deed. You must be pure as far as your houses are concerned, as far as your towns are concerned, as far as your rivers are concerned. No Zoroastrian would have allowed rivers to be polluted, as they are polluted today in England by factories that pour all refuse into them and make them sources of poison instead of sources of health. Everywhere the law of purity ruled in that ancient Persia, with the result of a splendid, healthy, virile people, a long-lived Nation, because they obeyed the religious law [Page 12] which, carried out in life, gives health, strength and vigour.

But when you come to the next great civilisation and its religion, you come into an entirely different atmosphere. It was the religion and civilisation of Greece. There the keynote was Beauty; not spirituality of thought as in Hinduism, not knowledge of science as in Egypt, not purity of life as in Persia, but beauty of life. When you think of Greece you always think of beauty. The most exquisite buildings come from her architecture. The grandest statues are imitations of her sculpture. The whole education of the Greeks was an education in beauty. The results of that on the life of the Nation were striking. The Greeks were surrounded by objects of beauty. Their city was full of architecture, the streets were the decorations of the capital. The Greek was the Nation of the most beautiful forms of humanity, because of the influence of beauty on the mind and the life of the people. Everything that the Greek used was artistic: his domestic vessels, his lamps, the things in which he carried water or cooked food were all beautiful, and the result of that was that the people were beautiful. The mother, surrounded with lovely objects, gave birth to children moulded into harmony and beauty by the beauty that surrounded her. That was the great teaching of Greece — the value of beauty in human life, and not only in outer objects created by the artist but in the beauty of language used by the poet, by the dramatist, by the philosopher. The form side of life had its perfection [Page 13] in Greece, and the whole religion of Greece was a religion of beauty which shaped the type of its civilisation.

That was succeeded in Rome by Christianity: an entirely different civilisation grew up as the life of the Nations of Europe. If you seek what was wanting in the elder days, you will find that what was left out was the sense of the value of the individual. You know how in Hinduism man is not an individual man: he is the man, the wife, and the child; it is the family and not the individual, isolated human being — a far more perfect conception, the conception on which the State hereafter will be modelled. The conception of the family life extended to the life of the Nation, just as you find Manu telling people to look on the poor, the younger and the uneducated as children; to look on all equals as brothers and sisters; to look on all elders as fathers and mothers. That was the idea of ancient India as regards social gradation, and the whole caste system is built up on that idea of elders, equals and youngers. But that omitted a very essential part which was needed for the future evolution of man, and that essential part was given in the religion of Christianity. The doctrines of Christianity, you must have often noticed have lost very much that belonged to the other religions of the world. The earlier Christianity lost the great doctrine of

reincarnation, and so there was a danger of its losing the doctrine of immortality, though men clung to it against all reason and argument by the intuition that saved it. But you find [Page 14] in the history of Christendom that it is man's own soul that is the supreme matter of importance.

There grew up a strong individuality. There is no use in objecting to a fact of that kind which is necessary for human evolution. It was necessary to have a strong individual, and that could only be developed by effort. You have in Christendom a civilisation, not only individualistic but combative, one man striving against another, every man fighting for his own hand. It is not only a question of physical war; but it is a question of social war, it is a question of class war, and you do not find all those wars developed anywhere as you find them developed in Christendom — evil you may be inclined to think, short-sightedly — but it is not. It is working to a greater good. The example of Christ was sure in the long run to correct this necessary fault in the Christian teaching, not found in Himself but found in His Apostles. You must remember that Christianity was made by St. Paul far more than it was made by Christ Himself. It was St. Paul who gave a dogmatic side to Christianity and made religion into a Church — a very, very different thing. Gradually, however, it was inevitable that the example of Christ should correct the faults of the civilisation by the example of true self-sacrifice. You have that corrective in the teaching as well as the example of Christ.

"He that is greatest is he that doth serve". "Behold", He told His Apostles, "I am among you as he that serveth". Out of that came gradually the [Page 15] idea that strength was made for service and not for oppression, and that which you call in Christendom public spirit, patriotism, love of country, altruism — all these were virtues that flowered out of that competitive system which had developed the strength necessary for the next step forward in human life; and strength linked to service is the ultimate lesson of Christianity.

Looking at that long past, then, of these great religions, we see one other had to be added — the religion of the great Prophet of Arabia; and it is there again profoundly interesting to see how that religion corrected some of the faults of the religion of Christianity, and brought to Europe what had been lost by the lack of knowledge in the Churches. Two marked characteristics there are in the religion of the great Prophet of Arabia. You see how it came out in the life of the Prophet Himself, courageous beyond the courage of man, calm and strong in the midst of uttermost peril, able to stand alone, convinced that He was not alone, for God was with Him. That strong Prophet of Arabia moulded a warrior civilisation on the one side, and a conquering civilisation followed in His steps. On the other side, there was knowledge, intellect, and science highly developed. It was the Prophet Himself that said, you may remember: "The pen of the scholar is greater than the blood of the martyr". But for Him so many men had died; for Him so many of His followers had been murdered — He who inspired love so passionate that when one of His followers had been tortured for [Page 16] hours and hours, his eyelids cut off, his whole body made into a mass of gaping wounds, and his torturer turned to him, and said: "Do you not wish that your Prophet was in your place?". "No", he said, "by God, I would rather suffer ten times the tortures, than that the Prophet of God should be pierced by a single thorn". Such love was felt by His first disciples to that wonderful Founder of Islām. You find in a religion such as that the dual note of the Prophet — the power of the conqueror, the power of the sword on one side: a military civilisation the teacher of science on the other. It was Islām that brought back Science to Europe. It was the followers of the Crescent, when they conquered Spain, who brought Science from the Greeks, which they had gathered up in the later days from the neo-Platonic schools; and then under the guidance of the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad they founded great schools in Arabia that grew into Universities, and in a hundred years made the

followers of the Prophet life-bringers to the western world. There you have the shaping of a Nation's life by religion. Warriors and Scientists those are the two marks of Muhammadan civilisation.

So looking over all these, we find in these different religions that each moulds the life of its own Nation, and that the spirit of the religion shapes the body of the National life. How does that affect us in India, where all the great religions are now found ? Does it not strike you that in the ruling of Īshvara in His world there must be some reason why this [Page 17] Motherland of the Āryan race has living on her soil all the great religions which have been as it were born out of her womb ? The Hindū here has his religion as active, as living, as compelling as ever. The Musalmāns are here the next greatest Indian community. The Pārsī are here not very numerous, it is true, but are influencing the Indian life by that commercial life which they had developed strongly by their wealth, by their enterprise and by their knowledge. Christians are here and in western and southern India there are great Christian communities that date back at least to the fifth and sixth centuries of the Christian era perhaps even to the second century A.D. So that there are hereditary Christians here, as much as most of you are hereditary Hindūs. They have a place here, not as aliens but as children of the soil. We see the religion of Buddhism, founded here by Lord Buddha Himself, and spread on to the other adjacent countries. We find all the great religions on this mother soil of India. How will they inevitably affect her National life ?

It is clear that as the outer ways are different, the outer customs are different, the outer dogmas are different, we must look to the uniting power of the religions in the spirit of Religion more than in the outer forms. I might show you that, even in the outer forms, they are so closely welded together that anyone who knows them intimately could make parallel lines showing how in ceremonies, rites and customs, they reproduce each other. Let me remind you only of one case. You all know that when your [Page 18] relatives pass away you perform shrāddha. You know the essential objects used in the shrāddha ceremony. You must have a material object, and you have it in a Pinda, and later in water. You must have a word of power — the *Mantra*, Without the *Mantra* what shrāddha could be performed ? You must have certain gestures — *Mudrā*, the fingers form a part of the ceremony; the whole of these are more or less familiar. Only some of the younger men, who have not grown wise, think that this is all superstition.

Take for a moment the Roman Catholic ceremony, which is more closely allied to Hinduism than is Protestantism. It is no use converting a Hindū to Christianity. If you have the whole thing in your religion in a very perfect form, why should you take it in another form from another religion ? The Roman Catholic teaches that there is the other side of death, and Roman Catholics perform for those who have passed onwards what you may call the Christian shrāddha — Mass for the dead. The idea is exactly the same as for Hindūs. You perform your shrāddha in order to help those who have gone, onwards through the stage of Kāmaloka to Pitrloka. The Roman Catholic performs his Mass for the dead in order that his beloved may pass onwards from Purgatory or Kāmaloka on to a happier life of Paradise — not rice in his case but bread, not water but wine. You notice there that you have two things, solid and liquid, used in two religious ceremonies with the same object.[Page 19]

Then, you find that there are certain words pronounced, and pronounced in the Latin tongue — not in the tongue of the people, but in their sacred tongue. I have often heard young men say: "Why should I use Samskr̥t words if I do not understand them ?" Because words are sounds, and sounds produce vibrations, and if you change the sounds you change the vibrations, and the sounds are meant to produce certain vibrations that will affect the sūks̥hma sharīra of man. A Roman Catholic pronounces his mantra in Latin, He pronounces the Latin form and produces the necessary vibrations from the sounds of

the words He also makes his gesture — the Sign of the Cross — using it over consecrated bread, using it over the cup where the sacred liquid is. You must be very blind if you do not realise that with a little difference of outer sign and not of real essence of meaning, these two ceremonies are exactly the same. They use the same methods and they have the same objects. In the one case they are helped by beings you speak of as Devas, and in the other case as Angels. The meaning of Devas is Shining Ones — you only use the Hindû form of description. The Roman Catholic calls them Angels and not Devas, but the meaning is the same.

Supposing you understand that the difference between you and a Musalmān, a Pārsî and a Christian, is not a difference in the God you worship — for there is One only, without a second, is not a difference in your own spirit — for every spirit in a human being is the spirit of God, and there is no other **[Page 20]** source of life; if you realise that you have the same difficulties, the same troubles, that you are born and die and are followed in your death by similar love and similar effort on the part of your neighbour whose outer name is not the same as yours; you begin to see the essence of religion, you begin to realise that man, in yearning after God and in searching after God, wears different garments, but the emotion and the endeavour are the same, and that Religion should become a binding power and not a separative force.

Then, you may begin to realise that these many religions of the world on Indian soil are meant to bring together into one mighty power all the powers of the world. Hinduism brings its jewel, Islām brings its jewel also, and Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism bring their own jewels, different in colour but alike in their preciousness. You will begin to understand that the Indian Nation of the future is not to be a Nation of one single religion only, but to embody the very essence of all religions; that it will have in it the philosophy of Hindûism, the valour and learning of Islām, the purity of Zoroastrianism, the love and tenderness of Buddhism, the self-sacrifice of Christianity. All these exquisite qualities, coming from the one Brotherhood of Teachers, and spreading abroad among this mighty Nation, will bring a completeness of perfection that a single religion, however noble and perfect, could never give, and you will realise how full of insight and truth were the words of the great Swāmi Vivekānanda, that a variety of religions was a **[Page 21]** gain and not a loss. Every view of God is added to the views already held, and so, however infinite the perfection of God Himself, more and more knowledge of that perfect Being will come to India through the many religions born on its soil and nourished by itself.