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APPROACH**

TO

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SRI SWAMI KRISHNANANDA – CORRECT APPROACH TO GOD

Correct Approach to God

Conversation with Sri Swami Krishnananda

The 3 Stages in Religion

On the Question of Correct Approach

On the Stages of evolution

The 3 Stages in Religion

Sarah: In Judaism, there is an idea that God makes contracts and pacts. What does that mean?

Swamiji: Covenants. In the Old Testament there are plenty of covenants mentioned. Covenant means an agreement with God.

Sarah: But, if He is Absolute, how can there be a covenant?

Swamiji: The Jews do not believe in God as the Absolute. He is, to them, a Transcendent Being. He is above the world, and, therefore, you can contact Him as you contact anybody in the world. The extra-cosmic transcendence of God is the concept of God in all Semitic religions. It is so in Judaism, in Christianity, in Islam, in Zoroastrianism, which are the four Semitic religions. Each one considers God as extra-cosmic, which means to say, above the universe; therefore, you can have your agreement, contract, prayer or covenant, whatever you call it. You can approach a big boss and have some kind of understanding with him. God looks like a boss because of this transcendence beyond the universe. You pray to God looking up to the skies. Why do you look up to the skies when you pray to God? You have a feeling that He is not in this world. He is above and is not here.

But there is nothing wrong with it; it is one stage of religion. In this stage of religion, God is envisaged as a transcendent extra-cosmic power to which you can look for help by surrender, devotion and submission. But that is not the only meaning of religion. There are other stages where the distance between man and God diminishes. In this concept of the transcendence of God as an extra-cosmic reality, there is a lot of distance. You do not know how far God is—there is an endless distance in space and time. Afterwards, the distance becomes less and less in the acceptance of God, not merely as a Transcendent Being, but also as immanent in all creation, right here and now.

God is not so far as you imagined Him to be earlier. He is also near; He is present in every atom. That is the second stage of religion. The third stage is where you yourself cannot be standing there outside Him, because of the all-pervadingness of God. These are the three stages of religion: transcendence, immanence and universality. All the three stages are valid; they are good in their own way. These are developmental stages of an ascent gradually from inadequate concepts to more adequate ones. So, all religions are good. There is nothing wrong with them; they are all different degrees of approach in an ascending order.

Sarah: And the Jews have an idea that they are chosen people, that they are a separate people from the rest of the world. What is the meaning? Why do they even come to that concept?

Swamiji: It is also one stage of thinking. You are a devotee of God, and so you consider non-devotees as not so equal to you. Suppose you are honestly a devotee of God and find others are atheists; don't you think that they are a little inferior to you? Though you are not supposed to think like that, you have somehow a predilection to think that these non-devotee atheists are inferior and you are a superior person. Whether you are justified in thinking like that or not, it is left to you to judge. A holy man thinks that unholy people are damned. Now, is he justified in thinking so? He may be or may not be; it is a point of view. There may be some truth and validity in their feeling that they are chosen people because they are really devoted to God; but whether they are justified in thinking that others are inferior, that is a different matter.

Sarah: But there is no idea that certain people are chosen for certain rules—they are all equal with different rules? Is there any idea of that as truthful?

Swamiji: Everybody has a role to play. It does not mean that one is superior or inferior to the other.

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Sarah: But there are different rules?

Swamiji: Different laws and different positions – each one is placed in different positions and stations in life, and from the point of view of the particular station in which you are placed, your work is decided. It does not mean that you are superior or inferior. You are fit for that, and others are fit for another thing. You cannot say that a shopkeeper is superior to the farmer, or a farmer is superior to the shopkeeper. They are doing different kinds of occupation in society, meant for the stability of humanity. Nobody is superior, nobody is inferior. So, each one has to play a role according to the circumstances in which one is placed, and there is no question of comparison. Nobody is chosen, actually speaking; everybody is chosen. If all are children of God, who is not chosen – unless you believe that some are not the creation of God?

ON THE QUESTION OF CORRECT APPROACH

Swamiji: There are about eleven religions in this world, what you may call the major religions-Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism. There are minor sects which you need not regard as actual religions. There are subdivisions like Sufism and mystical Christianity. All these have to be studied to understand the multiple patterns of the religious approach of mankind in its struggle to know the Ultimate Reality. All religions are good, but they look very funny when they compare and contrast themselves with others.

The whole point about the religions is that they are like many roads leading to one peak of a mountaintop, where they will all merge into one single spot. If this is accepted, there will be fraternity and brotherly feeling among the religions in the world. But there is an isolated tendency to assert each religion as a complete presentation of reality in itself, which has also the tendency to reject other approaches. Then comes clash and communal skirmish leading to social and political catastrophe. Like many rays of the sun are the many religions in the world. If one ray of the sun is competing with another ray, what would it be like? You have not only to tolerate the validity of another person's approach, but also accept the justifiability of that effort. Merely tolerating in a condescending manner is no good. You are not reluctantly tolerating the viewpoint of some person. That would make you place yourself in a position of superiority. There is a validity in the approach of all. You cannot say that a child is just blabbering nonsense. Rather, it is asking for something which is absolutely necessary for it in the condition in which it is placed at that time. It does not mean that a child is inferior to a genius; comparison is always odious. Never compare anything and contrast anything. Take everything for what it is.

Larry: Swamiji, what I find so perplexing is that I meet such wise and intelligent people in my own religion and other religions, but I don't...

Swamiji: You are one of them.

Larry: Thank you, Swamiji. But I do not understand why, for example, within my own religion, which I know best, so many of these people feel that only this approach is the correct approach.

Swamiji: That is the whole problem. It is absence of the requisite broad-mindedness. Why do you call people "Children of God," if one cannot have any consideration for another?

Larry: They have consideration for others, but they feel that because Moses received the word directly from God, this word is absolutely immutable and is the only expression, for a Jew, of God's will. And my question is, how did that come to be?

Swamiji: This attitude is present in all the religions of the West-namely, the Semitic religions. The transcendence of God, which is their concept of God, cuts off the world from God and converts the world into an evil den of Satan, and the earlier you are rid of it, the better for you. That is why extreme asceticism, monasticism, and things of that kind, and a condemnation of oneself arise. Asceticism often goes to such an extent of self-condemnation that the very existence of oneself is considered as an evil, a fall into the realm of demoniac activities. It is an

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unfortunate thing to imagine that some people are permanently meant for damnation. Even in India, we have certain theological doctrines of this kind.

There are some concepts, even in India, among certain circles of theology, which very funnily have held that there are certain people who are intended for eternal salvation, and others for eternal purgatory, and a third for eternal damnation. It looks very repugnant to hold views of this kind. Their God creates somebody only for hell, somebody only for heaven, somebody only for a cycle up and down. God does not create three sections like that. It is a travesty of religious approach to think that God created a world of sin and evil and He stands above it uncontaminated, and, then, the way of getting rid of this involvement in evil in the world becomes a great problem. If the soul is really a sinner, it can never be redeemed and if it is capable of being redeemed, it is not really a sinner. Such theology has an internal discrepancy. They are inadequate religions.

You cannot love God by hating someone else. The whole point in religion is misconstrued. Love God and hate the world. Then, why not love the world and hate God? Even that is good enough for some. There are people who feel that way. There are stages of approach in religion: the transcendental approach, the mystical approach, and the universal approach, to which everything has to tend one day or the other. The study of comparative religions is very good and necessary.

Sarah: You say each one is a separate path to the same goal. Is it important to follow all the details of each path?

Swamiji: All the details necessary for assisting you in your onward movement should be followed.

Sarah: How do you make that determination?

Swamiji: Your soul will tell you, which is the guide, the seeker and the goal. When you take lunch, you know what are the things you must eat and what you need not eat; don't you understand? Twenty things are served on the plate. Do you eat all the twenty? You know which of these are necessary for you. Your feelings, your requirements at that moment, will tell you what it is that is essential for you. You are the judge, yourself.

Sarah: Will it not be the ego that is just judging them, choosing what would be easier for it to follow?

Swamiji: When you love God as the Universal Being, the ego does not arise. There is no ego there. You must see things in the light of the universality that you are approaching. The ego will not stand before that non-ego. Mentally, you have to place yourself in the context of being in the presence of God Himself, as if the Almighty is looking at you. And, at that time, what will you do? Suppose the Almighty is seeing you just now, and you are sure that He is looking. At that moment, what will you do? Will you commit any mistake, any wrong? Everything will be chosen rightly at that time. So, feel yourself as being in the proximity of God. You are in the presence of God even now. The only thing is that you are not accepting it. With millions of eyes is the Almighty looking at you always. What will you do at that time? Whatever you do at that time is your religion. Religion is that which you do in the presence of God.

On the Stages of Evolution

Sarah: In Western religions, when people purify themselves and reach to a high level, they still God as a king or maybe as Jesus, but still as a figure. Even though they'll say God is one, they don't go to the point to say that He is a Universal Absolute Being in the same expressions that people use here. What has stopped them?

Swamiji: Their mind can go only to that level; it has not gone further. The mind stops at certain levels. There are stages of evolution of the mind. It can accept certain things, and beyond that it cannot go. It does not mean that the mind will be thinking only like that forever. For some time it will think like that; afterwards, it will evolve further. You cannot expect everybody in the world to think alike. Do you want all people in the world to think the same thought? How is it possible?

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They are born at different times and so they will also think differently, but everybody will think everything at the proper time. It is a question of time and evolutionary process.

Evolution is an ascent. It is a rising, as you have come from mineral to plant and plant to animal and animal to man; and even in the stage of human thought, there are varieties of levels, and everyone is not in one level only. It is not possible for everyone to be in the same psychological level. Otherwise, everybody would be the same-all people in the world would be thinking the same thought. That is not possible because of differing stages of psychological evolution.

Sarah: So, does that mean that things began at different stages? It did not all begin at the same time?

Swamiji: It began with matter, and then became vegetable. Vegetables do not think of God, and you cannot find fault with them merely because trees are not meditating on God Almighty. What do you say?. They are also existing in one level, and it is perfectly all right. Just because you have some idea of God, you don't expect a cow also to think like that. Why should you so expect? It has got its own way of thinking. It has one level, one stage, and you should not compare. The mind can think only up to one level; it cannot go beyond. But, afterwards, it will change its vision by a further advance of perspective.

Sarah: How come there are still rocks? Is evolution connected with chronological time?

Swamiji: It is not chronological, rather it is an all-round, universal movement. It is not beginning somewhere and ending somewhere else. It is a wholesome cosmological self-adjustment.

Sarah: And why are some minds allowed to develop?

Swamiji: Nobody is so allowing. It takes place automatically. No one is allowing a child to grow into an adult. It is a spontaneous movement of the universe into higher levels. It is automatic; nobody is "allowing" it.

There is nobody there to do that work. There is none outside the world. The world itself is doing it within itself.

Sarah: When one gets to a high level, let's say of God as king or Jesus, what. . .

Swamiji: That is one stage of thinking. You are thinking in terms of time. When you think of anything in terms of time and space, it looks very far and distant. That is why God looks distant. You are thinking in terms of space and time-because space is very wide and it has distance; therefore, when the mind thinks in terms of that, naturally, you foist the distance on God also, and He seems to be far away. God, however, is not a temporal level. It is eternity.

Sarah: Why doesn't Truth or Brahman break through those misconceptions? If people have gotten so high at that point, why wouldn't the misconceptions break? If they were real seekers of truth, why didn't it?

Swamiji: That misconception also will go away in due course. It cannot always be there; it has to pass. Everything has its own time and course. It will break through; it is a question of time.

Religious Freedom

By

Sri Swami Venkatesananda

True Catholic

It is good to remind ourselves at this point that technically the Master (Swami Sivananda) was a non-dual Vedantin. He belonged to what is known as the advaita cult. Perhaps this doesn't mean very much to you. Belief in a God is not an essential part of the advaitins' doctrine. The non-dual doctrine implies the total absence of all duality. There is a distinction between monotheism and monism. The Master's official cult was monism, not monotheism. Monotheism still has some sort of duality built into it. It implies the unity of Godhead-God is one, so that "we" are all still outside that. Monism says, "There is only ONE", and it is only because you are standing in front of me that I say so, otherwise I shouldn't even do that. So it is true to say, as did the monists, that God

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is not in an idol, or in a temple, in the sense that he is not confined to that form. BUT God, being omnipresent, is everywhere.

When this doctrine is heard, the obvious question that arises in the mind is, "Then why do you want to worship a God in a temple, in a church, in a synagogue, why don't you worship God everywhere?" But when you look at this paper, you see it as paper, not as God! For the mind has been so conditioned and it is not able to drop this conditioning. You seem to be trapped. So that in practice Gurudev had a rather interesting and remarkable theory which was reflected in his own daily life. He didn't ridicule the views of people belonging to other sects who were opposed to monism and who declare that "God and man are eternally separate, and it is ridiculous to say that man can ever become one with God".

Paradoxically the Master was both a bhakta (devotee) and a jnani (sage). He did not say that he was a bhakta and would therefore not study Vedanta or meditate. No, he preferred the integral yoga approach not merely this, not merely that, for the simple reason again that the mind is capable of playing all these tricks. Both the bhakta and the monist, by each denying an aspect of yoga, are caught in the same ego illusion.

The Master never criticized either attitude. That was his genius. He tried to include all this, knowing that at a particular stage, to a person of that temperament, all this is essential. He knew that all these are steps that lead to the same goal. He knew that if once in that idol worship you recognize or touch the core, you are bound to realize that that which you worship there in that image is here in 'you' too. As it is said in the Upanishads, "That which shines in the sun, is also that which shines in me." The genius of the Master was in the blending of these, what superficially appear to be, conflicting doctrines.

In Rishikesh, when he first came there, there were these two completely opposite camps. One which said, "Forget all your Vedanta, your enquiry and meditation. To have a vision of God is the highest goal. For this you must worship an idol." The other camp called them idolaters, men who were unfit for meditation and who did not understand the sublime philosophy of the Upanishads. It was given to the Master to bring one group up and the others down a little, and this was done in a very beautiful and subtle way. I have seen the Master deal with all these people; never once did he challenge anyone. If someone said, "God is in this idol," immediately he would agree and add "Come on, build a small shrine for your image. Worship there." Then someone else came along and declared : "I don't believe in all this, Swamiji. I can raise my consciousness to the seventh plane." And the Master never argued with him, never. He was prepared to understand and did not condemn even the fanatic, because this person sees something and is just not mature enough to see that it is not the whole picture. He must be allowed to come to maturity in his own time. So, often Gurudev bowed down to satisfy even the fanatics.

In the ashram temple there used to be puja three times a day-morning, noon and evening. Swami Sivananda who lived on the Ganges bank at the foot of the hill would climb all the way up to be there three times a day. This was when his health was still good. But a younger swami who was living nearer the temple would not attend the worship. What was Gurudev's attitude? As soon as the arati was over and the prasad (food offering which was also our breakfast in those days) was about to be distributed, he would call one of us, "Take some prasad to Swami So-and-so." But that is not the end of the story. That swami is not in the ashram now, he has since set up an ashram of his own, and I believe that there, puja and chanting of mantras goes on 24 hours of the day and that he insists that his devotees worship some form of God or other in a small private shrine in their rooms. If that is not the miracle of the 'prasad', I don't know what else it is. That maturity must happen within yourself. Gurudev did not even fight with fanatics. If you fight with a fanatic, you become another fanatic.

This was a marvellous aspect of the Master's teachings. He was eager to listen to everyone; even to someone holding a diametrically opposite view. You pursue your own path, you have your own philosophy of life. You don't have to abandon your religion, your method of worship

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and meditation, or your mode of life. The others may also have something interesting to say. Study others' points of view and develop friendliness, affection and understanding. One of our Master's most famous sayings was, "Break down the barriers that separate man from man." He repeated this hundreds of times, whenever he spoke, and it is ringing in my ears even today. As long as there is a feeling that you are completely and totally different from me, either because I am a Hindu and you are a Christian, or because I am an Indian and you are a European, or for any other reason, the danger of hatred and destruction is also there. Swami Sivananda said, "Realize that you are a human being, What your religion is, is your personal affair."

One scholarly and very devout orthodox Muslim used to come to the ashram. As an orthodox Muslim he would not do certain things, and certain other things he would do. Gurudev instructed his disciples thus, "He will be doing namaz (Muslim prayer) now, so please don't disturb him. He doesn't like this, don't give it to him. He likes that, let him have it. Keep a prayer mat in his room." He had great respect for the other person's religious practices. This is an important point to remember, Gurudev had faith in all these, but he himself practiced what he wanted to practice. He adopted his own mode of life, undisturbed by what others said. It is not possible for one to practice many different faiths. All roads lead not to Rome, but to 'roaming'.

Know that there are many roads, and if possible get acquainted with them, but continue to tread your own path to the centre.

TRUE CATHOLIC

In India, even amongst Hindus, there were in those days a few major cults, as there are in other religions. One day Gurudev received a visitor to the ashram, who was the head of the Siva cult, which meant that he should not adore Rama, Krishna or Vishnu, only Siva. This Swami had written to Gurudev explaining that he was going on a pilgrimage to the Himalayas and would like to stay at the ashram for a few days. Gurudev had replied, "Most welcome." The day before this holy man arrived, Gurudev called us all and said, "As from tomorrow for three days, only Lord Siva's picture must be kept on the altar, and don't sing 'Sri Ram Jaya Ram, Jaya Jaya Ram', but only the names of Ganesha and Siva. And don't read the Gita or the Vishnu Puranam, only scriptures relating to Siva, everything Siva".

Does it sound hypocritical to you? The Master was not a hypocrite. He was the purest crystal that reflected "the other" without the least conflict. "This Swami is devoted to Siva, as I am to the truth that God dwells in all." Gurudev's attitude was not, "He is as devoted to Siva as I'm devoted to Krishna or Christ". That might breed conflict. But it was, "I feel that all religions are one, all religions are equally valid, equally great, equally sharers of truth." Whoever came to the ashram gave us an opportunity to serve him and an opportunity to hear him-however fanatical he might be. One type of fanatic cannot cure another. Why offend the other person, why even provoke him? The principle is to deal with people at their human level. It is possible that each religion represents a partial view-there is no perfect total view. If you look out of the window, you see the sky. It is not the total sky, it is only a small portion of sky. Nobody in the world has seen the total sky, the whole space, nor the whole truth, nor God. You can never have a vision of the whole-that is God. But, what you are seeing is the sky, let us not forget that. You are not seeing the total sky, but you are still seeing the "sky".

Can you regard religion as your own extremely private encounter with God, your personal spiritual adventure, and in relation to others in society, remain a human being? Swami Sivananda's extraordinary genius taught us what it was, not merely to tolerate, but to understand one another. What is understanding? Respect-"I respect your views even if you don't respect mine"-that is the beauty. Gurudev also used to say, "Even he who denies God, affirms the existence of God, because the very self of the denier is God. That substratum for the intelligence that says, 'God does not exist', is God". In the evolution of that person, maybe this is a necessary step.

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The Master never challenged anyone, never forced anyone to go against his own conscience. Never. In the ashram his own disciples held widely divergent doctrines and views but they were all loved and respected by Gurudev. To me, this seems to be the essence, the cream of the realization that God is omnipresent. Not the word, not the concept, but the realization of the omnipresence of God. This realization lived as Swami Sivananda.

Another remarkable incident nearly shook everyone out of their wits. In 1953, Swami Sivananda organized what was known as the Parliament of Religions. A number of learned scholars belonging to different faiths had been invited, and there were other people who had come merely to participate in the function. Obviously this was an occasion when the congregation was not made up entirely of disciples and devotees of Swami Sivananda, and the mood of the audience was a bit difficult to gauge. Because it was a cosmopolitan crowd, the proceedings were conducted mostly in English except for one or two swamis who could not speak English (they spoke Hindi or Tamil or some other language).

On the second day, one swami who was sitting on the platform passed a note to one of the organizers, "I want time to speak." The organizer said "No, there is no time." Gurudev, who was also seated on the platform, watched this through the corner of his eye. The note was passed to him. Gurudev said, "Let him speak. I won't speak today, let him speak." What did this man do? He stood up and grabbed the microphone so that no one could snatch it from him and for ten minutes spewed forth nothing but criticism and abuse of Swami Sivananda. Nothing else. He went on, "He is living in North India, where the language is Hindi, yet he writes in English, speaks in English." This was meant to be a parliament of religions, not a parliament of languages, but this man was totally unconcerned with all that. He had come merely with the intention of attacking the Master in public. You should have seen Gurudev's radiant smile. He kept saying "Very good, very good", (in Hindi of course). You could see the steam coming out of other people's ears, their brains were boiling, but Gurudev was quite calm, as if to say, "That is your opinion, your view, your path-go on". He did not even want to try to justify himself in this man's eyes or convince this man that because there was a world-wide circulation of Gurudev's books he had to write in English. That was our Master's wonderful attitude and therefore again, it was extremely difficult to pierce through all these veils and come face to face with his real nature.

It does not make any sense at all to give up being a Christian, or a Hindu or a Muslim. What for? What are you going to be instead? Will you practice a new religion, a universalist religion? What is a universalist? The Universa 'list' has a list all of his own, in which there is condemnation of every other religion. This is a waste of time. Be what you are. Gurudev tells you, "Seek God wherever possible. See God in all."

Authentic Religion

Offered to the delegates of the 1993 Parliament of World Religions with respectful greetings and loving good wishes - Swami Chidananda

Esteemed Friend,

Just as the different or various paths of Yoga are but varied approaches to the Divine through one or another facet or aspect of your human nature, even so, the various religious systems that exist and prevail in this world today are ever so many ways of approaching the one Supreme Cosmic Reality, who is transcendental and cannot be encompassed within the confines of the limited experience of our finite senses or our finite inner cognising instrument of mind, intellect, etc. He is known as "Para", in the Sanskrit language meaning that which transcends, that which goes beyond, that which is beyond.

There are many effective, equally valid religions. They are, therefore, to be equally revered, equally recognized and equally loved and cherished - not merely tolerated. They speak of religious tolerance. The word tolerance smacks of a sense of condescending to allow something to be, condescending to recognize the authenticity or validity or bonafides of something else

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from a relative or comparative point of view. It is a term that should be gradually eased out. For it is not so much a question of tolerating another's point of view, but rather being able to understand that view from the other's viewpoint. If you are able to look through the eyes of the one with whom you are not able to agree, then you will understand why that person is seeing it in that particular manner.

"Ye yathaa mam prapadyante taamstathaiva bhajaamyaham" - In whatsoever way men approach Me, even so do I go to them. (Bhagavad-Gita Chp. 4-11) This is the motive or maxim par excellence for people of all religions to adopt in their approach to the so-called different religions of this world. Religions are apparently different, but they are essentially one. There is a non-difference in religions in that they all exist with one objective to fulfill, with one great process or one great spiritual purpose. And that great purpose is religare - once again to bind yourself back unto the supreme Cosmic Source of your being.

You were bound unto the Supreme in the beginning. But there now seems to have been a loosening of that bond, not bondage but a bond, which is a desirable thing, a necessary thing, an indispensable thing. That bond has been loosened, so a connection has been broken, as it were. There is never any loosening of the bond or breaking of the connection between you and that being. Ever you abide in him. It is because you have lost your spiritual awareness that you are regarding yourself as some other being, non-spiritual, material, physical, gross, phenomenal. Due to this lesser consciousness, obscured consciousness, you are not able to experience and feel that essential spiritual connection between you and that supreme source of your being. But, again and again, the scriptures declare that there never has been a separation. It is impossible, for He abides within you as the innermost Self of your being. And you abide in Him. Why ? Because you cannot abide anywhere else. For, He is infinite and thus everywhere present, omnipresent.

It is not only that He brought you into existence, but also, there is an essential non-difference between the essence of your being and that Supreme Being. The sages and seers of yore who realized That Being within the deepest depth of their spiritual consciousness were given the supreme inner experience that That Supreme Being is one and non-dual. That Being alone exists. That Being alone is the one, sole, eternal Reality. They realized: "ekameva advitiyam brahma" (Brahman (God) is one only and non-dual), "nehananasati" (There is no diversity here). Therefore, "sarvam khalvidam brahma" (All this is verily Brahman (God)) became a fact. It had to be recognized. It was truth. And because that Supreme Essence or Principle or Being is one and non-dual, then the many that we see must necessarily, in essence, be the outcome of that one Supreme Being.

In a home there are so many different items such as bedsheets, pillowcases, table cloths, shirts, towels, handkerchiefs, napkins, etc. But one who sees a little beyond says that they are all cotton only, no matter what shape, form or color they may be. A lady may wear a variety of ornaments such as a necklace, bracelets and rings. We see many things, each one different from the other, but the goldsmith sees only one thing - gold. In a pottery factory you can see innumerable different items of pottery in all shapes and sizes. We see the great variety, but the owner of the factory knows that they all consist of a single element-clay.

So, even as various kinds of cloth of different sizes and shapes and colors are constituted of but one material, namely cotton, even as different types of gold ornaments worn on various parts of the body are made only of gold, and even as different kinds of pottery are but one material, clay, even so, the entire universe of innumerable variegated names and forms are, in essence, but one Being in a glorious cosmic manifestation. Therefore, the appearance of the many does not invalidate the non-duality of the one Supreme Principle. IT alone prevails, non-dual, one without a second.

All religions have come into existence in global human society, in this phenomenon of man, in order to take man back to the eternal source of his being, and not only take him back, but bind

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him back, bring about a firm relationship. How ? Either by love of your heart, through devotion, prayer, adoration, glorification; or by the penetrating analysis of the intellect, constantly dwelling upon it, enquiring about it, analyzing it, trying to approach it, to grasp it through understanding it from all various facets; or by concentrating all the scattered rays of your mental powers into one powerful, single unified ray and focusing that unified mind upon the concept of that one supreme, non-dual Divine Reality to the exclusion of all other ideas through the inner, mystical process called meditation; or trying to approach it by feeling the presence of that Being pervading and prevailing everywhere, now and here, and directing your entire life, love and thoughts into a continuous stream of service unto that Supreme Reality in and through its various appearance as human beings, animals, insects, plants, all forms of life existing on earth, thus making yourself a servant of the immanent God indwelling all his creation.

Even within the context of the Vedic religion, all these different approaches, the different paths of Yoga - one through feeling, one through reasoning, one through concentration, one through active service, although being apparently different, are recognized as being one. All lead to that oneness. Even so, all the religious systems that prevail and exist in this world today are directed towards the adoration of one Supreme being who is non-dual, Who is the identical, same Being, call Him by a hundred different names.

All religious systems ultimately are ascending movements in the direction of the one, supreme, non-dual Cosmic Reality that is the source and origin of countless billions of universes, known and unknown. All religions move in that direction and have but one self same objective: to once again bring the individual, the human monad into direct contact and permanent relationship with the cosmic Universal Being. This objective is the same; the goal is the same. The means may be different, but the way is one - directed towards one ultimate destination, that is, God-experience. You may call it Allah-experience, Bhagavan-experience, Nirvana-experience, Brahman-experience, Yahweh-experience. Call it any name; it is the Supreme transcendental experience of the cosmic source and origin of your being, the cosmic source and origin of all existence.

This is what requires to be recognized. This is what requires to be lovingly preached. This is what requires, with firm faith and conviction, to be brought to the knowledge of the masses. And it is the great onus, the responsibility, and the supreme duty to man as well as to God and one's own honesty, of all learned ones who are the custodians of the various religions, not to preach difference, that we are different from one another, but to rather proclaim this inner, essential spiritual oneness that is the one and only fact of the phenomenon of man upon this planet earth. Then alone humanity will gradually become one.

All the supreme heads of the religions should sit together. They must recognize that a new chapter is opening up for global mankind and that the part that religion has to play is not the part that it has played up till this moment. It has to undo the follies of the past religious history of the world. It has to make amends for all these follies as well as sins. Religions have committed the greatest sins in the name of religion. They have to make amends. We must go down on our knees, lift up our hearts and hands to God and weep and repent, and say that religion has been in error. Religion has misguided humanity. Religion has taught humanity to be irreligious in the name of religion.

Religion is love. Religion is recognizing the presence of God everywhere and in everything as a living truth, and real religion is to live a life emphasizing and manifesting this truth through the love of all that exists.

And until religion becomes what it is meant to be, the fate of humanity will always be clash and conflict, hatred and disunity, discord and disharmony. Only sorrow can come out of it, not joy, not peace, not prosperity. Religion must now assume a different role, its true authentic role. Until now it has lost its direction, it has gone off at a tangent, it has become derailed.

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Whereas everything else seems to proclaim the differences in God's creation, religion is the one phenomenon which is supposed to proclaim the truth of our oneness. We are non-different. We are children of the One Being. Essentially, we are all one. But it is a matter of great regret that up till now religion has failed in its global mission of unifying man. It has emphasized the wrong factors, the changing factors. It has emphasized the non-essentials of religious forms. It is the Spirit that has to be emphasized, not the form. Form cannot affect the essential unity of the spirit within.

Therefore, religion now must recognize that till now in human history, religion has erred. It has not fulfilled its real mission on earth. It has brought about a great deal of pain and suffering. It must recognize this error, correct it and make up its mind that the time has now come that a new chapter is opening up, that its role is now different. We have to play the role of unifiers.

It's never too late to mend. There should be a resurgence of essential religion, real religion, which is one. There are not many religions. there is only one religion: man's path back to God, the individual's ascent to the Universal Reality, the cosmic phenomenon of the human being once again linking himself to his Divine source and abode. This is religion. And now, the unified religious policy of global humanity must seriously engage itself in undoing what it has done by losing its direction and take on this new role as proclaimers of oneness, proclaimers of harmony. All religions, therefore, exist and prevail in order to raise up the human spirit towards its essential divine status, godly status, so that man's nature becomes filled with the godlike qualities of love, compassion, kindness, purity and with everything that is sublime, beautiful, holy and sanctifying. Man's heart is the right field for the play of these sublime, godly qualities such as harmony, understanding, unity, selflessness and a spirit of service. This is real religion. This is true practice of religion - to be a true child of God, to be a true witness to His all-perfection.

If we are representatives of that Cosmic Being, then through our lives, the whole world must see and recognize the perfection that That Being is. Then alone a new era can dawn for global humanity in the twenty-first century. Religion can and must become a great unifying force, a great force for unity and harmony. Then we can say indeed that God has spoken to man and that religion has now come to take its rightful place in human society and to fulfil its destined, great, sublime role of making man aware of his spiritual nature and his oneness with humanity. For within all, that same Light of God dwells as their own true eternal identity.

WHAT IS RELIGION?

By

SRI SWAMI KRISHNANANDA

New Year is fast approaching and we will be in another year within a couple of hours. Years have come and years have gone; we have celebrated the ushering in of the New Year many a time. But we are no better than what we were many years back. Why so? Religion, which is supposed to help us in this respect, does not seem to be of much avail, because we have not understood what religion is. So let us now ponder over this very important subject, "What is religion?"

In a broad way, religion may be regarded as pure commonsense. It is not a compulsion or an imposition that is inflicted upon one by people from outside. It is something which we cannot avoid, due to the very set up of things. We know there are certain things in life which we cannot avoid because of the circumstances under which we are placed. Sometimes people start saying, "What can I do? I cannot avoid it the situation is such". We are placed under such circumstances sometimes that we have to do something, whether we like it or not, want it or not. Likewise, religion is something which we are obliged to accept as something unavoidable, which we can never entirely turn a deaf ear to, under the conditions in which we exist in this world. As long as we are in this world, there is religion. And we shall be always in some world, which is a name we give to the universal atmosphere in all its planes or levels of expression. Thus, the world is not

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going to vanish. Religion, then, is going to be eternal, it can never cease to be, if religion can be defined as the duty that we owe to the Universe.

The other question that arises as a sort of corollary from this position is, "what is meditation?" The same answer holds good to this question also in essence. If we know what religion is, we will also know what meditation is. Because, meditation is nothing but the contemplation of the fact of religion. So, when religion is known, meditation also is known. The duty that we owe to the Universe is our religion. Can there be, then, many religions in the world? This question also is automatically answered in this small aphoristic answer: "Religion is the duty of man to the Universe".

Can there be many kinds of duty towards the Universe? This query can only be answered by an analogy. There is a family consisting of many members-father, mother, brother, sister, children, and so on. Each member of the family owes a duty towards every other member of the family. Now, does this duty vary from member to member, or not? It varies, and it does not vary. Both answers hold good here. It varies in the sense that the capacity of each person is different from that of the other persons. It does not vary in the sense that the duty of each member of the family works towards the fulfilment of the common purpose of the family. One member may wash the vessels every day. Another member may wash the clothes. A third member may go for shopping. A fourth may receive visitors and guests, and a fifth may cook dinner. Now, these are all different functions which each member of the family performs. But, what is the purpose behind all these different activities or functions? It is to keep the solidarity of the family and to keep the family alive as a 'Whole', and not to keep each individual member alive separately, like unconnected bricks in a heap. The family is not merely the members, but it is something more than each individual member, just as a government is not any governmental official, merely. Every official is a part of the government. Yet no single official can be said to be the government, as such. The government is invisible to the eyes. You cannot see it anywhere. If you search for the government, you cannot see it. You will only see persons, and yet, all these persons put together do not make the government. Then what is the government? It is the 'principle' behind the operations of these people. The 'principle' is not seen, only the people are seen. You can see the President, you can see the Prime Minister, you can see the Ministers, and many others. All these people put together, as different individuals, also, do not constitute what you mean by government. The officials are the limbs of the organism or the body called the government. In a similar manner, we may conceive and understand religion. So is also any kind of organisational set up, a Society, for instance. An Organisation is not people and buildings. Rather, it is a "Principle" which everything else has to subserve. There is a principle operating behind all the things that you see. That principle is the law, the nation, the cultural cohesion of kindred aspirations. This is government. This is society. This is Organisation. This is family. This is religion', wherein the principle of organisational living reaches its cosmical climax.

There is also a principle operating behind the variegated duties that you owe to the Universe. This principle is to be the object of your meditation. I said, when you know what religion is, then you know what meditation is. Meditation is the contemplation on the foundational principle of religion. Religion is a principle. Please remember this. It is not a formality. It is not a cult or a creed, or an action or an activity of individuals. It is a cementing force in human society, even as the governmental system cements officials as well as the citizens. Hence, going to the temple, offering worship, reading the scripture, doing charity and rolling of beads-all these, while they look like religion,-do not make religion as such, because religion is more a state of consciousness, outlook, feeling and attitude than a mere form bereft of this inner significance. Without the members, there is no family, and yet, the members are not the family. This is an enigma behind the distinction between the principle and its manifestation. Religion as a principle is invisible. And without the principle there cannot be religion. Behind all activity there is a policy, as you call it. "What is your policy?" people ask. You have seen activities, but what is the policy

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behind the activities? That is very essential. If that is missing, the activities lose sense. Likewise, your religion and your religious activities will have no significance if there is no policy behind it. And what is this policy? Why do you do this and not the other way? The policy is to manifest your relationship to the Universe. The policy of the family is that each member of the family should manifest his or her relationship to the other members. Though the activity may vary in its shape and form, the relationship does not vary. The child does a little work, the mother does something else and the father does a different kind of work. There is no superiority or inferiority in the works or duties here. The significance behind these activities is identical, which is all a love for what they call the family, -though they cannot explain or define what family is. Patriotism, the spirit of love for the nation, is not love for any official of the government, or even for a set of persons. It is love for a principle behind what you call nationality or the national spirit. The 'national spirit' is different from the 'people of the country'. These are all difficult things to comprehend for an untrained mind. Likewise, an untrained mind cannot understand what religion is.

Now I come to the subject of religion, about which I said that your relationship to the Universe determines what your religion is. But what is your relationship to the Universe?

Can you tell me, what is your particular relationship to your family? You belong to the family in such a manner that you cannot be 'out' of it. Likewise, you belong to the Universe in such a manner that you cannot afford to be 'outside' it even for a single moment. The good of the Universe is your good, even as the good of the family is the good of every member of the family, the good of the nation is the good of every citizen, and the good of the whole is the good of the parts. The good of the body, or the health of the body is the good of every limb of the body. So, too, religion is not merely an activity of the limbs of the body or a group of people. It is not what you do with your hands and feet merely. It is an attitude that you develop in your consciousness. When you look at the world, what do you think of it? And that is your religion. When you gaze at the world, what is your opinion about it? That is your religion; not what you do in the temples and the churches. That is not sufficient religion, though it is a part of religion. It is just a manifestation of the spirit of religion. And the spirit of religion is your attitude. Thus, religion is an attitude of consciousness. It is not an activity or function that you perform, as an individual. It is a general attitude of affection for the Whole to which you belong in the atmosphere of the Universe.

This is a highly philosophical problem, if you push it to its logical limits. It is a very crucial matter, determining our very life itself. If you have a chaotic attitude towards the Universe, you will have a chaotic religion, you will lead a chaotic life, and confusion will be the consequence. If you do not know what exactly is your relation to your family, you know what will happen to the family. There will be no family. It will be disintegrated. You stand together as one force when you say, 'I am from this family'. Just as you have an integrated force called the family and another integrated force called the nation, you have an integrated force called humanity or mankind. When you speak of humanity, you speak of all mankind. Just as there is a force called mankind, a force called nation or family, there is a force called the Universe. This is essential to understand.

Now, to understand this, you need not go to the scriptures for reading. Pure commonsense alone is enough. You cannot say that you are outside the Universe. You are in it and you know what bounties you enjoy from it. You cannot live without the resources of Nature. You want water and air, you want light and heat, you want food; and all these come from the Universe. Do you not contribute your mite to the maintenance of the family because the family supports you by providing you with education, food, medical aid, love and care, and helps you in all ways? Does each member not owe an obligation to the family which supports him? Likewise the Universe sustains us with food, water, air; the very breath that we breathe and our very existence is determined by it. Thank God, the planets do not dash against one another, crushing our heads. Suppose there is a collision of the planets, you can imagine what would happen to

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us. No such thing happens, and everything is wonderfully maintained. There is a system in the cosmos which protects us. It gives us training and education and enables us to be alive here. Do we not owe an obligation towards it? That is our religion. Now, this obligation cannot vary in its spirit. That is what I am trying to point out. Though your functions may vary, the spirit behind them cannot vary. The child's attitude towards the family is the same as the attitude of the big father towards the family, though their functions are different. Likewise, you must look upon the Universe as a single family, where you owe an attitude of cooperation, collaboration and non-exploitation in respect of everyone. You cannot exploit the family, for you know that is not good; that is not becoming of a member of the family. You should try to sustain it. Similarly, we should not exploit the world, or Nature as a whole. We should not exploit even God. That is not proper. Exploitation is always bad, wherever it is. The law of life is cooperation and not competition and exploitation. "We should not take what we have not given", to put it in simple language. Religion, in its highest form, is this great principle or policy, as explained.

In actual practice, in day-to-day life, religion takes the form of "do not take what you have not given". Whenever you take something from the world, please consider whether you have given to the world something equally in any form. If you have given nothing, take nothing. If you have taken one thing, you have to give one thing. Otherwise, the Universe will set up a revolt against you. When the Universe revolts against you, you know what will happen to you. You will not be there, for you will be pounded. Unfortunately, the Universe has already set up a revolution against us. That is why there is birth and death. The series of births and deaths is nothing but the punishment meted out to us by the law of the cosmos for infringing its principles. We always regard the Universe as something outside us, as a foreigner, as-a stranger and we want to exploit it nay, conquer it. You always talk of conquering Nature as if it is an enemy. Do you talk of conquering the family to which you belong? Never, is the answer. Then why do you talk of conquering Nature? Poor Nature, it is your own. Why do you want to conquer it? You are a part of it. Know this and act accordingly. Then, like a loving mother, Nature will come and take you on her lap. The Universe will sustain you. There is no fear in this world. Fear is unknown to the one who cooperates with the world. But, for the one who exploits, there is fear everywhere, and such a man cannot exist without fear and anxiety for a moment. If you are a good man, you will not exploit any person or individual, any facility that is provided to you, not even Nature and God. Religion is your conscious attitude towards the Universe, philosophically, and in principle. And in practice, it is following the instruction 'do not take more than what you give', 'do not exploit but cooperate'. Feel that you belong to the Universe, which is your family. It is better to remember the analogy of the family, so that you may know what your position in this world is.

There is something more about which nothing need be specially said, because it is implied. Just as there is a head of the family, there is a Head of this Universal Family. You cannot see Him easily. But you can see Him when you cooperate in his laws. The law will take you to Him. The law has also ordained that we shall have actual, direct contact with the Head of this Universal Family who, is the creator of this cosmos. When this Universe takes care of you, it is implied that God Himself takes care of you. Religion is not yours, not mine, and it is not of the East or the West. There are not many religions. There is one religion only, in fact. It is a scientific principle that operates in the Universe. Religion is the greatest science. People ask, 'Is religion scientific?' This is a stupid question. Because religion is the only science ultimately going to be successful in the world. There is no such question as 'whether religion is scientific'; I say there is no other science. All other sciences are the children of this Supreme Science which goes by the name of religion, without which man cannot even exist in this world. Religion is metaphysical, philosophical, and psychological, ethical and practical, social, political, and everything. It permeates every fibre of our existence. It is the Supreme Law that operates everywhere, governing men and women, young and old, every person in all walks of life. It is an Eternal Law. It is the Law of God, the Law of Nature.

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May this be your contemplation on the eve of the New Year, throughout the year and also throughout your life. May this understanding of the real religion lead you to the realisation of the true God, is my prayer at this auspicious moment when the New Year is about to ring in.

APPENDIX: BOOKS

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- Swami Sivananda: « The Unity that underlies all Religions »

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