

Theme 3 – Degradation and Conflict

Presentation: The Sacredness of all Living Organisms

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It is my task to expound briefly what religion has to say about ecology and the environment from the Indian point of view. By religion I do not mean a system of thought, a creed or a cult, rituals and ceremonies or prohibition and injunctions regarding human behaviour. All these things are part of all the great religions and are useful elements of them, but they are not the essence of religion.

The deepest heart, the inmost essence of religion, apart from its outward machinery of creed, cult, ceremony and symbol, is the search for God and the finding of God. Its aspiration is to discover the Infinite, the Absolute, the One, the Divine, who is all these things and yet no abstraction but a Being. Its work is a sincere living out of the true and intimate relations between man and God, relations of unity, relations of difference, relations of an illuminated knowledge, an ecstatic love and delight, an absolute surrender and service, a casting of every part of our existence out of its normal status into an uprush of man towards the Divine, and a descent of the Divine into man.¹

It may seem that this idea of religion emphasises man's relation to God, but does not stress his relation to his fellow-beings. That aspect of religion is clearly brought out in another pregnant sentence of Sri Aurobindo: he has also written that one who loves God but does not love man does not love God either. If this be the core of religion, then what does it have to do with ecology and the environment?

To find an answer to this question we must enquire what Indian spiritual thought has to say about God and Nature. The briefest and the most comprehensive description of God is found in the Vedanta, the most developed and effective system in Indian spiritual thought and practice. God is Sat, Chit and Ananda, Existence, Consciousness and Bliss or Delight. These words suggest an abstract impersonal Reality. While that is one aspect of God, the Vedanta of the Upanishads also affirm that God is personal, that he is Existent, Conscious and Enjoyer of the Bliss of Self Conscious Self Existence.

Consciousness in this description of God is not

a phenomenon dependent on the reactions of personality to the forces of Nature and amounting to no more than a seeing or interpretation of these reactions. The subjective personality itself is only a formation of consciousness which is a power inherent, not in the activity of the temporary manifested personality but in the being, the Self or Purusha... Consciousness is not only power of awareness of self and things, it is or has also a dynamic and creative energy. It can determine its own reactions or abstains from reactions; it can not only answer to forces, but create or put out from itself forces. Consciousness is Chit but also Chit-Shakti [Conscious Force].²

God does not need religion but man, as a conscious being, does. God is Reason according to Christian and Islamic theology, but surely not human reason. God does not have to know or act with the help of the often deceptive senses and the very limited capacities of the human mind. I would suggest that what Vedanta means by Consciousness, chit, is what the Semitic religions describe as the Reason of God, or God as Reason, the Word of John's Gospel. My point is that the part man plays in destroying or improving the environment depends on his state of consciousness.

According to Hinduism the real man, the true self of man, is of the same essence as God. The word dharma is derived from the root dhr (dhri), which means to hold, to support. Hindus should conduct their lives according to dharma, which is the Law of the universe and thus of human life, both individually and collectively. The term has moral and ethical, juridical, religious and spiritual significance, all of which are connected. For all practical purposes it means religious morality, which according to one system of Hindu philosophy leads to both worldly prosperity and spiritual liberation. Those in India who were atheists also observed dharma, the principles of individual and social morality and ethics. In the context of discussions on devising practical measures for saving and improving the environment, it is my opinion that the moral aspect of dharma is essential.

Many Jewish, Christian and Muslim writers say that the world was created by God, and therefore man is expected to revere Nature. Vedanta not only says that Nature and the world are entirely dependent on God but that He has become the world. He is both the instrumental and the material cause of the world. This may sound like pantheism but Vedanta holds that God is always both transcendent of and immanent in the universe which is nonetheless God in becoming. The root of the word in Sanskrit for the becoming of the world is Srj, which means to loose forth, to bring out into open manifestation what is contained within. If this be so, how much more should man respect, revere and love Nature, how much more should he care for and tend our planet, because that would be the means of fulfilling God in the world?

Since the nineteenth century, man's God has been Mammon, and his Goddess, Success. The consequence is that since then everything has been grist to the mill of sensation and enjoyment. In this process the environment has become a hapless victim.

In ancient India, human life was divided into four spans; brahmacharya, garhasthya, vanaprastha and sannyasa. These are, respectively, the stage of studentship in which study and moral training were the main duties of young people; the time to marry, earn money, work for prosperity and raise a family; after retiring from the practical business of life, a time to concentrate on developing a keen aspiration for spiritual liberation; and finally, when minds and hearts were sufficiently pure and worldly ties or desires did not bind, the stage of renouncing all mundane values to practise spiritual disciplines in order to achieve spiritual liberation.

The moral foundation for the stage of the householder was laid in the first stage. The students lived with their gurus, their moral, intellectual and spiritual guides, in the forests. They developed respect and love for Nature and were trained to look after its welfare throughout their life. The householder was instructed to earn enough to support himself and his family comfortably. After this obligation had been met, he was instructed to dig wells and ponds, plant trees, build shelters for travellers and places where drinking water could be given to them, activities meant to preserve Nature and enhance its life and beauty. The fulfilment of these duties earned the householder religious merit and thus economic prosperity, moral duties and religious merit were all rolled into one concept and practice, that of Dharma.

Today the situation is sadly very different and India is facing a great cultural problem. People chase relentlessly after economic prosperity and social success. Trees are cut down causing an acute shortage of drinking water; the building of dams helps industrial development but also inundates many villages. The villagers become homeless and many flock to nearby cities and towns, this in turn causing environmental problems. The increasing sales of cars and motorcycles helps the economic prosperity of the country but adds daily to pollution in the cities and their suburbs.

India is a poor country and people have a right to improve their lot and raise their standard of living. However, when people start thinking that better living is the be-all and end-all of their existence and the ideal of a good life is lost sight of, then things start to go wrong. The problem is, how can we bring about a reconciliation of the idea of good living and the ideal of a good life?

In ancient India there was no conflict between science and religion. India made great contributions to mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, medicine and psychology. Some of the scientists were also spiritual sages and saints. It was recognised that the natural world and the realm of the spirit were two different areas of enquiry with respective means and methods of investigation. It seems to me that modern conflict is not so much between science and religion as between the scientific view of the world and the religious perspective of it. The latter did not, in ancient India, deny the findings of science about the natural world though it did claim that the truths of science were not complete. Science now has no right to dictate thinkers' methods of attaining knowledge to the religious, nor should religious leaders deny the truth of the sciences.

The question boils down to man's sense of value which is a matter of consciousness. Scientific discoveries are in themselves neutral. The use made of them is decided by men. Atomic energy can be utilised for electrification and irrigation or to make atom bombs. I am pleading for a basic change of consciousness in man so that he can review his concept of good, his view of nature and his responsibility to the environment around him. Those who are concerned about improving the environment must take a stand against those scientific discoveries and their practical applications which affect the environment unfavourably. Unfortunately, political rivalry, military expediency, interests of economic imperialism and the struggle for markets seem more important than the preservation of the environment and the improvement of the quality of life. There is a steady corrosion of our sense of values. It is imperative that we cleanse our sense of priority of our needs and wants. They are by no means the same.

Auguste Comte proposed a Religion of Humanity.³ What he meant, I think, is that we should cherish humanity and do all in our power to improve the quality of mankind's existence. It seems to me that today we need a Religion of Nature. Refined sentiment, respect, reverence and even love must be cultivated if we would not exploit Nature in our inordinate clamour for exciting and sensational pleasures. The time has come to cooperate with nature so that she can give us as much as she can and man in his turn must not extort more than she can yield at any time. Ancient Hindu thought described man as a child of the Earth, which was the mother, and of Heaven, the father. Even if not everyone can believe in God, we can at least revere and love and do all we can to preserve the health and beauty of Earth and Heaven, our 'parents'.

Echoing Sri Aurobindo's profound and beautiful remark that one who loves God but does not love man, does not love God either, we may well say that one who loves man but does not love Nature, does not love man either. Let us salute Nature with humility, gratitude and love.

Notes

1. The Human Cycle. In Social and Political Thought, Vol.15, p.122.
2. Letters on Yoga, Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library Vol 22, pp.233-34.
3. Considerations on the Spiritual Power, (1826). Auguste Comte actually substituted the Great Being for God - humanity of the past, present and future, but the phrase 'religion of humanity' has been inevitably associated with the name of Comte.