

# COMPARATIVE RELIGIONS

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*One of the never answered questions asked by men throughout the ages is why there is such a diversity of religions in the world, with each one claiming to have the ultimate answers to the perplexing problems regarding our existence. What is the nature of phenomena – Is it real or unreal? Is there a creator? And if there is, what is his function? Is he really omnipotent? What is the position of man in relation to the Creator and other things? Is man really the monarch of all he surveys? Is there a permanent soul? The following extract from 'Comparative Religion' by Kedar Nath Tiwari attempts to state in simple terms how the great religions of the world attempt to answer these questions.*

*Ed.*

## World Religions

Religions of the world, except Buddhism and Jainism, believe that the world is the creation of God and is also dependent upon him. They also generally believe that God brings the world to an end at his own sweet will. But they differ in details regarding the actual process of creation and the exact nature and status of the world. Although Hinduism believes in creation (at least the dominant part of it believes so), it does not seem to believe that the world was created at a definite moment of time. In this, it differs from the Semitic religions and agrees in a sense with Buddhism and Jainism which hold that the world is somehow coming down from all eternity. Of course, Hinduism (and also Sikhism) believes in a cyclic process of creation and destruction of the world and this cycle is going on alternately from all eternity. Again, because Hinduism in general believes that the world has been created out of the materials constituting God's being, and not *ex nihilo*, therefore, creation, according to it, means unfolding of a portion of God's being and dissolution or destruction means the return or re-entry of the unfolded material into God in a contracted form. Both creation and destruction, however, occur at God's sweet will. According to the Semitic religions, creation means creation out of nothing and it has been accomplished by God at a definite period of time.

(Sikhism also believes that the world has been created at a definite period of time, although nobody knows when). Moreover, creation and destruction do not go on according to these religions in a cyclic order, rather the world has once been created by God and is subject to destruction by him at any time in future. The Zoroastrian view also regarding the creation and destruction of the world seems to be closer to the views of Semitic religions, although it is not clear whether Zoroastrianism takes the world as created out of nothing. This seems to be the case with Islam also, which forms part of the Semitic faith itself. Moreover, while both Judaism and Christianity have similar creation myths, Zoroastrianism and Islam do not seem to have any such mythical stories regarding the exact process of creation. Islam seems to regard the fact of the world's creation a mystery and points out that it is difficult to say how exactly or through what exact process the world was created. Nevertheless, according to both these religions, as according to others also, the world is definitely a creation of God and is fully dependent upon him for its sustenance.

As to the nature and status of the world, it may generally be said that almost all the religions take it as real. Of course, some religions lay greater emphasis on the reality of the world as compared to others, but no religion, perhaps, takes the world as wholly unreal. Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Sikhism seem to lay specifically explicit emphasis upon the reality and significance of the present world, while from the overall attitude and tone of Hinduism and Buddhism it appears that they do not want to emphasize the significance and reality of the world too much. But undoubtedly they do not regard the world as unreal. There is so often a criticism against Hinduism that its attitude is other-worldly and that it regards the present world as unreal. Dr. Radhakrishnan has considered such criticisms against Hinduism at length in his book *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* and has very competently come to the conclusion that they are totally mistaken and misconceived. First of all, it is only against Advaita Vedānta, which represents only one aspect of Hinduism and not the whole of it, that such criticisms may have any relevance. This system of Hindu thought, of course, takes the world as māyā, which apparently implies that the world is unreal. But there are parallel systems, not less influential, like those of Ramanuja and others which explicitly maintain that though the world is dependent upon God, it is fully real. Critics of Hindu thought and religion totally miss these trends present in it. Secondly, even Advaita Vedānta, properly interpreted, does not regard this world as wholly unreal. From the practical standpoint it takes the world as fully real. The doctrine of Māyā only

indicates that the world has got a deeper significance than what on the face of it appears to us. It is spiritual out and out and unitary in its inner character. The world is, therefore, not negated here; it is only seen in its deeper, more real perspective.

Thus no religion takes this world as unreal in the sense that it is non-entity or that moral and other activities performed here have got no real value. But then every religion in one way or other takes excessive attachment to the world as undesirable and therefore does not take this world as something which is ultimately real. Of course, religions of Indian origin - Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism - lay much emphasis upon this aspect of the matter and therefore it seems that they possess a negative attitude towards the world. Religions like Judaism and Zoroastrianism much emphasize the role of man in this world in so far as his entire future according to these religions depends upon what he does here. If he adopts good and shuns evil, he has a bright future, otherwise he will be doomed. Zoroastrianism explicitly paints the world as a ground of constant strife between the forces of good and evil in which man has to take active part. Those who take the side of the former really take the side of God and therefore they are sure to be rewarded by God. But those who take the side of the latter go against God's will and they are sure to be punished. But such ideas are not absent from the eastern religions. They also clearly maintain that only our actions in this world determine our future. The law of *Karma* actually stands for such ideas and beliefs. What these religions teach is not the unreality of the world, but a lower reality of it as compared to the higher and the ultimate one. And such a distinction between the higher and the lower, between the spiritual and the profane, is necessary for religion. As a matter of fact, all the religions of the world are based on such a distinction. It is not a fact that religions like Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity take attachment to this world as desirable. On the other hand, they also teach non-attachment as a virtue. Hence, all religions with greater or less emphasis take this world as real, although all of them take excessive attachment to it as undesirable.

## **Man**

Man has been given a very high status in almost all the religions. Buddhism and Jainism do not believe in God. Naturally, therefore, man becomes the highest being in them. He is potentially capable of attaining Godhood by himself. It is only due to the cloud of ignorance that his real great nature is temporarily hidden. In Hinduism and Sikhism also, man is regarded as the

highest creature. The soul within him is really the divine spark and thus of all the creatures he is specially privileged. It is due to ignorance that man fails to recognise the greatness of his being and suffers from various limitations. The moment he realises his real nature, he becomes infinite and free from all limitations. Judaism and Christianity also in their own ways make man the greatest of all creatures. According to them, God made man in his own image on the final day of creation to be its final fruit. Moreover, man has been made to act as the fellow partner of God in his scheme of establishing the complete reign of good on earth by eradicating evil. Zoroastrianism also gives the same status to man. According to it, in the constant strife between the forces of good and evil on earth, man is to play the role of the fellow partner of Ahura Mazda so that he can be able to dislodge the forces of evil completely and establish the reign of perfect good on earth.

Of all the religions, however, Zoroastrianism seems to give the greatest dignity to man and at the same time inflicts the greatest responsibility upon him. According to it man is completely free and unstained in his original nature. He can do whatever he likes. Ahura Mazda has made him completely free to choose between good and evil and act accordingly. Of course, God wants man to choose the path of good, but it is up to him what path he chooses. According to Christianity man comes to earth being stained by Original Sin and according to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism he takes birth with the blurring cloud of ignorance and the burden of the past karmas. But according to Zoroastrianism man is born completely pure and spotless with perfect freedom of will. Thus man himself is fully responsible for every act. This is not the case in the context of other religions. In Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism man comes to earth with certain limitations and therefore in one sense he can neither be taken as completely free nor can assume the full responsibility for his work. In Islam, the case seems to be even worse. Hinduism, Buddhism etc. cannot be called deterministic, but obviously they do not grant man that amount of freedom which Zoroastrianism seems to grant. Law of *Karma* is a symbol both of determinism and freedom. Judaism and Christianity also grant freedom to man in their own ways. They point out that although God is omnipotent, he has willingly imposed a limitation upon his all-powerfulness and has granted freedom of will to man. Man can use his freedom in any way he likes. In the end it can be said that every religion, including Islam, grants some amount of freedom to man because of their talk of a bright future for man by virtue of his own good deeds on earth. If freedom does not mean anything, man

cannot be held responsible for his good or bad destiny.

As to the nature of man, religions of Indian origin are very clear in saying that it is essentially spiritual in nature. Man has got a soul within him which constitutes his essential nature. This soul is immortal and therefore man in his essential nature is immortal. Even Buddhism which apparently seems to deny this soul virtually accepts it in its own special manner. Judaism and Christianity also maintain this essentially spiritual character of man by maintaining that God has created man in his own image. Because God is spiritual in nature, so man is also spiritual. However, we do not find in these two religions that much of emphasis upon the spiritual and immortal nature of man as we find in Hinduism, Jainism etc. Soul in man is not given that important and distinct status by these religions which are given to it by Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism.

### **Evil and Suffering**

Because suffering is a burning fact of life, every religion takes care of it and considers it as a problem. But the reactions are not always the same. Religions of Indian origin generally take the problem of suffering in a practical perspective and take it as their chief burden to point out ways and means for getting rid of suffering. Of course, in this connection they also point out the cause of suffering. Religions of Semitic origin, on the other hand, react to it in, more or less, a theoretical perspective. They want to advance an explanation, a reason, for suffering. Why is suffering there at all? Or what can be its justification, when the world is taken as created and maintained by an omnipotent and benevolent God? - is the kind of problem which these religions somehow seek to answer. Zoroastrianism also seems to adopt this very perspective. Now, although in the details of such explanation, these religions differ, in essence, they all accept that evil and suffering have been allowed by God for some good inherent purposes. The ways of God are mysterious and we human beings are not able to know his entire plan. Apparently, suffering seems to be an evil, but really or ultimately that is not evil. God must have some good purpose behind that.

As cause of evil, Zoroastrianism and all the Semitic religions tend to hold a devil with all his spirits responsible. In Zoroastrianism, this devil is named Ahriman, in Judaism and Christianity Satan, and in Islam Iblis. But then no religion seems disposed to take the devil as an independent force falling out of God's control.

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