

CHAPTER 9

Church and World Religions



Anand Mahadevan, the editor of 'Outlook Business' was a Tamil Brahmin. He is a Christian now. He explains how he happened to be a Christian. While he was studying in a college, one of his Christian friends invited him to his house. He accepted the invitation and he got a chance to pray with him. The power and fascination of God experience, which he received that day, persuaded him to embrace Christianity. He says: "I am proud that I am an Indian by nationality. I am at total ease with the fact that by culture I am a Hindu.... I can say definitely and truthfully that no one threatened or tempted offering money or cheated me to change my religion into Christianity" (*Sathyadeepam* Oct. 29, 2008).

Man Who Seeks Truth

Man who seeks the meaning of the universe has always been a seeker of truth. This search leads one to the thought of God. In other words, seeker of truth is always a seeker of God. Religion has its origin in the search for God. In the beginning religion did not have such systematic, complex, strict forms and rules as we have today. The primary forms of the search for God are worship of the powers of cosmos, oblation of manes, black magic or witchcraft, worship of deity, thought of absolute etc... There are communities, which started in the belief of many gods and finally developed into the belief in one God.

Origin of Religious Belief

There are many opinions or arguments regarding the origin of religions. In the opinion of the exponents of the theory of Evolution, man began to believe in God along with the growth of his awareness of the various phenomena of the universe, the creatures and himself. In the view of

certain psychologists, belief in God originates from the false consciousness. They think if people do not adore God who controls everything, there will be destruction and failure. In the opinion of social scientists religion has its beginning more from mutual human relationships than in individual needs.

In the opinion of spiritual science, the origin of religion is from the search for God, the creator of the universe, the invisible power who protects and guides the universe. The source of spirituality in one's own soul, led to the origin of religion. To be brief, man's search for truth led to the concept of God and finally to religion.

We know that the views about religion are different. Thought about religion deeply influences man and his history. Today, there are people who believe in different religions.

World Religions

The term 'religion' means 'opinion'. There are certain questions which confuses a man seeking truth. One's religious belief is one's opinion about certain fundamental questions like the meaning of life, good and evil, origin of sorrow, goal of life, death, judgment, life after death etc. The term religion means relation and to relate. People must have been persuaded to depict religion as the relation between God and man.

1. Shintoism

This is a religion, which originated in Japan in 8th century B C The term 'Shinto' was from two Chinese words 'shin' which means 'God' or 'Spirit', and 'Thavo' meaning 'way' or 'means'. In this universe there is the presence of gods and souls. They call these powers 'kami' (super person). They consider anything extraordinary and terrifying as 'Kami' and adore it. Shintoism is a religion, which considers anything above the ordinary man as god, instead by looking at god as a person or power. Hence, Shintoism does not consider anything as a superpower, that goes beyond all these powers. Still Amartharaso, the Sun God, who rules the heaven, is the supreme God. The holy books of this religion are Kojiki and Nihongi.

2. Confucianism

Confucianism is a religion started by Confucius (B C 551-479) who lived in China. Vouching and Su-shoo are the two holy books of this religion. It believes in many gods. They believe that one can reach heaven if our lives are based on five fundamental virtues. They are compassion, a sense of shame about the wrong deeds, proper system or style of behavior, wisdom to discern good and evil and fidelity.

3. Taoism

The founder of this religion is Lao Tzu- a Chinese contemporary of Confucius. He lived in 6th century B C Their religious book is 'Thabo-The-Ching' written by him. God is the prime essence indescribable, the meaning and the end of everything. Human intelligence alone cannot seek and find him. Instead God should reveal Himself. In this revelation, God, universe and man are not different. Instead, the three are one. The understanding of these knowledge is heaven. In ordinary Taoism, belief in many gods is also practiced.

4. Parsi

The founder of this religion is Zoroaster who lived in Persia in the 6th century B C Its holy book is the revelation which Zoroaster received from God. Parsee religion believes in one God. God created the universe. God is present everywhere and in everything in the universe. Man is a mixture or integration of soul, body and spirit. He receives heaven or hell depending on his deeds in this world.

5. Jainism

Jainism was founded by 24 Theerthankaras. The first Theerthankar Rishabhan and the last Theerthankar Varthamanamahaveeran are given more importance. Vathamamahaveeran is a contemporary of Budha. Its holy book is 'Jainasookthangal'. Jainism does not have the thought of the existence of God seen in all other religions. Jains believe that man cannot see or understand God. Moreover, if we do that, the idea about God will become incomplete/ imperfect. They believe that we can reach God, liberating ourselves from the activities of this world and its connections through Nonviolence and Meditation. To attain heaven one should have 1. Right belief 2. Right knowledge and 3. Right action.

6. Buddhism

Buddha, an Indian who lived in the 6th century B C, founded this religion. The holy book of this religion is 'Dharmapadam'. The cause of all sorrow is desire. If we give up desires, sorrows will disappear. Buddhism insists eight fold path for this: 1. Right Knowledge, 2. Right View, 3. Right Word, 4. Right Action, 5. Right Living, 6. Right Deed, 7. Right Thought and 8. Right Samadhi. This religion gives much importance to Nonviolence.

7. Sikhism

Guru Nanak – a Panjabi, who lived in the 15th century A D, founded this religion. It originated as a result of combining many elements from Hinduism and Islam and interpreting it. It

believes in one God. God is truth. Bhakthimarga is the means for God realization. Sikhism accepts and teaches the concept of birth and rebirth as in Hinduism. Mukthi is the liberation from this world, becoming one with God-the infinite light.

8. Jewish Religion

We cannot say who the founder of this religion is. Jews accept Abraham as the father of their faith. They consider Moses, who liberated them from Egyptian slavery, led them to Canaan and gave them the 'Thora' (law book) as their great leader. Their holy book is The Bible (Old Testament). The foundation of Jewish religion is belief in one God alone. God created the universe and all creatures out of nothingness. He created man in his own image and likeness as the crown of creation. Man sinned and God was angry and expelled man from Paradise. God promised a Saviour to save mankind. The Jews are awaiting that saviour even today.

9. Islam

This is a religion revealed to Prophet Muhammad by 'Allah' (God) between 610 and 632 A.D. Its holy book is 'Quran'. Its aim is to reestablish the original friendship between the creator and the creatures in Eden. They call God 'Allah'. Allah is the creator and judge of everything. Allah is the only one, all – powerful and very merciful. Prophets were people who handed over the messages of Allah to men. The most important and last among them is the prophet Mohammed. 'Quran' contains the messages which God gave directly to Mohammed Nabi. Hence, man is obliged to obey 'Quran' word by word and completely. One needs to perform five religious duties to be a Muslim and to reach heaven. They are known as 'five pillars' of Islam.

- 1) Believe in Allah and the prophet and proclaim it.
- 2) Do the fixed Prayers for five times at the exact time.
- 3) Give alms compulsorily, depending on one's financial capacity.
- 4) Practice abstinence (lent) in the month of Ramzan.
- 5) All who can must go on pilgrimage to Mecca- the holy city (Hajj). Islam teaches that if we do this one can reach heaven.

10. Hinduism

It is not easy to define Hinduism. The various practices which the majority of Indians follow are known as Hinduism. They are also known as Eternal Justice and priestly devotion. It has no

particular founder. Hinduism is not based on any single holy book. It is a life style combining philosophy, theology, practices of worship and moral science. It is the sum total of Sadhanas leading man to heaven. The holy book of Hinduism is a combination of books. It contains Vedas, Upanishads, Brahmanyas, Bhagawat Geetha, Ramayana and Mahabharata.

From the view point of Hinduism, God can be viewed from the theory of many gods, (dwaitam), and single God (Adwaitam), 'Bahudevavadam' is the way of worshipping all powers beyond human understanding as god. In 'Ekadevavadam' they follow the method of worshipping one God alone. 'Advaita' teaches that the spirit of god and man's spirit is one and the same.

Man is bound by worldly action (karma), selfish desires and ignorance. Heaven is liberation from all these. Death does not put an end to everything. With death, he leaves the body, takes new life and enjoys in heaven. Man gets proper reward in future for his good and bad deeds. This reward is not eternal. One attains 'mukti' when he completes the reward of the experiences of his previous life or when he comes to perfect wisdom. Until then, he is subject to rebirth. Mukthi is liberation from life and death circles, which lasts infinitely. There are three ways to attain mukthi. They are wisdom, action and Bhakti. Those who attain Mukti become one with God. That is in a state of eternal bliss.

Christianity

Christianity is the religion of the community who believes in Jesus and lives according to His teachings. Christianity originated in the background of Jewish religion. The foundation of this religion is the revealed truths which Jesus the only son of God revealed. God prepared a nation or a set of people as a part of God's plan that all should be saved in the name of Jesus Christ who took the form of man. The Old Testament of the Bible, which describes very carefully how God prepared the Israelites, is part of the Bible, the Holy Book of Christians. Christ who took up the form of man in the fullness of time, proclaimed God the Father and His plans through His life and teachings. The essence or core of this is the New Testament of the Bible. Jesus taught to love one's enemies and to love one's neighbor as one loves oneself. Jesus is different from other religious founders in the sense that he is the Son of God and he suffered, died and resurrected for the salvation of all (1 Tim 3:16).

Jesus chose His disciples to continue His mission. He handed over His mission of evangelization to them and ascended into heaven. Acts of the Apostles that describes the story of the Christian community formed in the name of Christ and the Epistles of the apostles teachings, the communities of church in various places are part of the Bible. Christian teachings containing

new lessons of God's love and love among man attracted many towards it. A Christian is the one who accepts and proclaims Christ as the only saviour (Acts 4:12).

Approach to Other Religions

In the light of the declaration of the IInd Vatican Council with the title 'Non-Christian Religions' the approach, which a Christian should have towards people belonging to non Christian religions is made clear. "Catholic church does not deny or reject anything that is truthful and holy in other world religions" (*Nostra Aetate* 2). Catholic Church does not reject anything that is truthful and holy in other religions. The behavioral patterns and activities, the life style, rules and doctrines of other religions are, in many ways, different from what Catholic Church believes and teaches. Still Catholic Church looks at them with sincere respect (*Nostra Aetate* 2).

Church believes that sparks of truth which enlighten all are in them since certain elements of truth and the presence of God are present in all religions. These religions remain as a sign of salvation for those who believe in them. Church recognizes that certain assertive and meditative traditions are there in other religions (Mission. 18). God has not set aside anyone from his salvific plan. His salvific love embraces all.

I. Find out the Answers

1. What is religion?
2. Among world religions, which are the ones who believe in one God and which are the ones who believe in many gods?
3. What is the difference between Christianity and Jewish religion?
4. How is Christianity different from other religions?
5. What is the approach which Christians should have towards other religions?

II. Let us Discuss

1. Can we agree to the idea that “Whatever be the religion, it is enough that man should be good”?
2. How do you look at this thought that it is not conversion of religion but conversion of mind that is desirable or important?

III. Activity

I will never go astray from Catholic Church.

IV. Let us Enlighten our Hearts

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).