



Vedanta Society of Toronto

(Ramakrishna Mission)

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Newsletter – November 2007

**Om purnam adah purnam idam, purnat purnam udacyate;
purnasya purnam adaya, purnam evavasisyate.**

Fullness is above, fullness is below, from fullness to, fullness has come and still, the fullness remains the same
(From '*Isavasya Upanishad*')

Words to Inspire

The Upanishads are a spiritual treasury, presenting deep and profound ideas in simple language. Students, wanting to understand these ideas for themselves, put questions to *rishis*, or spiritually enlightened sages. The answers were given in intimate heart – to heart conversations. It is these answers that make up the *Upanishads*. The logical and impersonal presentation endows them with a scientific air. At the same time, the words, coming as they do drop deep contemplation and illumination, from some of the most sublime poetry ever written. These sages received revelations based on their experience of reality. These revelations are impersonal, universal and eternal.

In studying Upanishads, it should be remembered that though the ideas are universal and timeless, language is a function of so many factors, such as time, civilization and cultural background. Thus, if we are to understand the Upanishads correctly, all of these factors must be kept in mind and given due consideration. The language used belongs to that period, and we must try to perceive the ideas and thoughts from that perspective if we are to understand them. After grasping the idea, we may then consider it in the context of the present day and ponder its relevance. In this way, we can avoid the pitfall of 'text – torturing', whereby the ideas interpreted to suit our own convenience or school of thought or our own particular opinion. Many, commentators have fallen into this trap and have, at times, had to put meaning into verses to make them consistent with their own system of philosophy. No matter how great or how enlightened these opinions may be, we must remember that they are still only opinions. In the Upanishads there are no systems. Reality can not be squeezed into a system.

The sages of the Upanishads never cared to record who was teaching or who was being taught, and so their personalities never came into the limelight. This is the reason why the Upanishads never created a cult or school. In science, the law or discovery is of primary importance, the scientist himself being secondary. It is not who discovered it but what was discovered that is important. We do not have cults in science, and as I said before, the Upanishads have a scientific air.

The Upanishads are addressed to all of humanity. The sages saw all humanity as one unit. Blessed be those sages who never conceived of any kind of discrimination – monk or householder, man or woman. These classifications were introduced by later commentators and, in course of time, became traditional. Traditions are to be respected, and sometimes even followed, but let us not distort truth to satisfy traditional pattern. Truth is a very abstract term and has many dimensions. It is much more valuable than tradition.
(From '*God is Everything*' pages 1-2)

DO WE NEED RELIGION?¹

V. Kumar Murty

Introduction

This is a question that, in one form or another, can be heard as the subject of discussion amongst laymen as well as scholars. Whatever we may understand by the word 'religion', it is clear that it has had significance, impact and relevance for human life. Swami Vivekananda says "Of all the forces that have worked and are still working to mould the destinies of the human race, none, certainly, is more potent than that, the manifestation of which we call religion. All social organizations have as a background, somewhere, the workings of that peculiar force, and the greatest cohesive impulse ever brought into play amongst human units has been derived from its power. It is obvious to all of us that in very many cases the bonds of religion have proved stronger than the bonds of race, or climate, or even of descent. It is a well-known fact that persons worshipping the same God believing in the same religion, have stood by each other, with much greater strength and constancy, than people of merely the same descent, or even brothers."²

Before we discuss the question of whether we need religion, we should first try to understand what we mean by 'religion'. The word 'religion' is understood in different ways. Some think of it abstractly and others think of it more concretely.

Abstractly, one may discuss it from an anthropological, psychological or sociological perspective. Anthropologically, some ask whether humans are 'hard wired' to form some concept of religion? Is it something that we cannot avoid? Is the concept of 'God' simply an outcome of our neurological construction? Some think of it from a psychological perspective and ask what relation it has to the various layers of mind. Others quickly transform it into a sociological question and ask about the benefit to society, or the lack thereof, of the concept of religion.

There are others who will discuss this question more concretely, by identifying the word 'religion' with organized religions. Individuals or communities 'belong' to an organized religion and they are considered 'practitioners' of that religion. For the most part, this 'practice' refers to following certain observances, and this 'belonging' refers to acceptance of a certain dogma or doctrine. People belonging to that group refer to each other as 'believers'. Those who argue in support of the necessity of organized religions will point to the benefits that have accrued to individuals and to the world through the institutions of religion. In particular, they will refer to the charitable service rendered to disadvantaged people or to those who are victims of natural calamities. They will say that it is because of institutionalized religion that individuals and communities have been able to cope with personal or natural disasters. On the other hand, those who argue that we do not need organized religions will point to the harm that such institutions have wrought. Some will argue that the history of institutionalized religion is one of divisiveness and fragmentation of society, and that it has generated violence and bloodshed resulting in major loss of human life.

All of these perspectives and discussions have their benefits, but also significant drawbacks. When we discuss religion as a sociological phenomenon, we tend to divorce the individual from the equation and restrict attention to society as a collective. When we discuss it from an anthropological perspective, we sanitize the human being into a laboratory specimen. When we discuss it from the psychological perspective, we tend to equate, and thereby limit, the individual to the plane of the psycho-physical. When we discuss it from the perspective of organized religions, we tend to equate life with external action. All of these perspectives have something valuable to teach us, but their common limitation is that they do not address the entire spectrum of life and existence. A human being is a social entity but also an individual and that individuality goes beyond the psycho-physical level. We need an analysis that takes the whole human being into account, and the whole of existence.

What is religion?

Let us begin with the meaning of the word. Etymologically, the word religion comes from the Latin word 'religio' which means 'that which unites'. Those that argue that religion, in the sense of institutionalized religion, is a divisive

¹ Based on a talk given at the Vedanta Society of Toronto on October 14, 2007.

² "The Necessity of Religion", in: Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (hereafter referred to as CW), Volume 2, p. 57.

force in society are often startled when they first learn the etymological origin of the word. It sounds almost contradictory to common sense. And yet, that is what the word means. This is the case, not only in English, but in Samskrit as well. The word 'dharma' means that 'which holds together' or 'which unifies'.

This is captured in the final hymn of the Rk Veda, one of the most ancient scriptures of the world: "Sam gacchadvam, sam vadhadvam...": Let us be united. Let us speak in harmony. Let our minds apprehend alike. United be our hearts. United be our thoughts. Perfect be our unity.

Let us analyze this a little further. What is it that we are trying to unite? Again, at first blush we are tempted to think of society, communities, nations and so on. However, social unity, communal unity and national unity is just one aspect. There are actually three dimensions of unity. The first dimension is unity within ourselves. The second is social or interpersonal unity, which is unity with beings and things. The third is unity with Ultimate Reality. Let us discuss each of these in turn.

Unity within ourselves

We think in one way, act in another, speak in yet another and feel in another way. For example, we may intellectually accept social equality, but in practice we might be quite sectarian. If it is pointed out to us, we will be surprised and offer some innocuous explanation for our behaviour because we do not regard ourselves as prejudiced or sectarian. In fact, it is an unresolved conflict within. Unity within ourselves means to resolve these kind of conflicts, including those that we are aware of and those that we are not yet aware of.

Unity with beings and things

The majority of our time is spent in interpersonal relationships. We act and react on each other throughout the day. If those relationships are not harmonious, we will feel disturbed and will not have peace of mind. Such a state of mind is not something that can be sustained for long without having a harmful effect on the entire personality. Unity with beings and things means to act in a way that is harmonious and constructive.

In this context arises the concept of ethics and values. Religion is often associated with ethical conduct, as it should be. The foundation of ethics is to act based on the awareness of unity.

Unity with Ultimate Reality

Diverse though they be, we all have notions of a reality that transcends the phenomenal and the routine of daily life. Whatever our convictions in this regard, we must harmonize them with the rest of our personality and our life. In particular, we must harmonize them with experience. Convictions have to mature into experience. And that experience has to be reconciled with everything else in our life. This harmony is what is meant by unity with Ultimate Reality.

If we understand religion in this sense, as that which unifies, the question 'do we need religion?' becomes moot. In the first instance, regarding harmony within ourselves, there is no question of belief, but very real existential problems that we face and that we want solutions to. How do we gain happiness and peace of mind? How do we gain a sense of fulfillment? These are existential problems. It is clear that every one of us wants unity within as that will solve these problems.

Similarly, the desire for inter-personal unity is also universal. No one chooses to have conflicts, disagreements, divisions and factions. To live in a harmonious family, community, society, nation and world is obviously something that everyone wants. Again, this has nothing to do with belief, but a basic need that all of us have.

Do we want unity with Ultimate Reality? Of the three dimensions of unity, this is the one that requires more probing as it does not seem to address an obvious existential problem. In the first place, what do we mean by 'Ultimate Reality'? And does such a reality even exist?

However, a little probing will show that it is also a necessity. It is said that man does not live on bread alone. When our physical and psychological needs are satisfied, we will still not feel complete. There is another urge within us that asks for meaning. What is the purpose of all of this? Viktor Frankl has built an entire philosophy around 'the will to meaning'. It is related to the question 'what is real?'

At the same time, it is not that these questions of reality, meaning and purpose do not arise until we have established harmony and unity at the personal and inter-personal levels. Our struggle for unity at these three levels is simultaneous. Even before we have established unity at the personal and inter-personal levels, there are realities of life that push us to look for something deeper. One of these is the reality of death.

Swami Vivekananda writes "Great is the tenacity with which man clings to the senses. Yet, however substantial he may think the external world in which he lives and moves, there comes a time in the lives of individuals and of races when, involuntarily, they ask 'is this real?' To the person who never finds a moment to question the credentials of his senses, whose every moment is occupied with some sort of sense-enjoyment – even to him death comes, and he also is compelled to ask 'is this real?' Religion begins with this question and ends with its answer."³

(To be continued in the next issue)

Swami Vivekananda on Worship Through Symbols

(From *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 4)

In all countries you find various grades of worship. In this country, for instance, there are people who worship images of saints, there are people who worship certain forms and symbols. Then there are people who worship different beings who are higher than men, and their number is increasing very rapidly — worshippers of departed spirits. I read that there are something like eight millions of them here. Then there are other people who worship certain beings of higher grade — the angels, the gods, and so forth. Bhakti-Yoga does not condemn any one of these various grades, but they are all classed under one name, Pratika. These people are not worshipping God, but Pratika, something which is near, a step towards God. This Pratika worship cannot lead us to salvation and freedom; it can only give us certain particular things for which we worship them.

The danger is that these Pratikas, "nearing-stages", so far as they lead us on to a further stage, are all right; but the chances are ninety-nine to one that we shall stick to the Pratikas all our lives. It is very good to be born in a church, but it is very bad to die there. To make it clearer, it is very good to be born in a certain sect and have its training — it brings out our higher qualities; but in the vast majority of cases we die in that little sect, we never come out or grow. That is the great danger of all these worships of Pratikas

The next thing to be considered is the Pratima, or image, the use of images. All over the world you will find images in some form or other. With some, it is in the form of a man, which is the best form. If I wanted to worship an image I would rather have it in the form of a man than of an animal, or building, or any other form. One sect thinks a certain form is the right sort of image, and another thinks it is bad. The Christian thinks that when God came in the form of a dove it was all right, but if He comes in the form of a fish, as the Hindus say, it is very wrong and superstitious. The Jews think if an idol be made in the form of a chest with two angels sitting on it, and a book on it, it is all right, but if it is in the form of a man or a woman, it is awful. The Mohammedans think that when they pray, if they try to form a mental image of the temple with the Caaba, the black stone in it, and turn towards the west, it is all right, but if you form the image in the shape of a church it is idolatry. This is the defect of image-worship. Yet all these seem to be necessary stages.



Special events

November 4 at 12 pm - Sitar Recital by Adam Duncan
November 9 at 6 pm - Kali Puja Celebration
November 18 at 11 am - Annual General Meeting

³ "The Real Nature of Man", in: CW, Volume 2, p. 70.

BELUR MATH NEWS

Medical Bulletin on Revered President

Maharaj –

Revered President Maharaja's condition has not improved and continues to be critical. His general condition has been fluctuating on and off. He continues to be under close observation.

The second convocation of **Vivekananda University** was held at the University's Faculty Centre at Coimbatore on 8 September. Dr. R. Chidambaram, Principal Scientific Adviser to Government of India, delivered the convocation address. Swami Prabhanandaji, General Secretary, who is also the Chancellor of the University, presided over the function and gave away the degree and diploma certificates to 74 successful candidates of the Faculty of Disability Management and Special Education, in the presence of a large number of teachers, staff, students and academicians.

Hyderabad Math celebrated the silver jubilee of its temple consecration ceremony and school of languages from 28 to 30 September. Swami Smarananandaji, Vice-President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated the programme. In all, about 4800 persons, including 53 monastics, attended the function.

FLOOD RELIEF WORK 2007 - 2008

In the wake of the recent devastating floods in **Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Orissa** and **West Bengal** the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission through their different centres conducted relief work, the details of which can be obtained from the following link –

http://www.belurmath.org/relief_news_archives/relief_latest_news.htm

UPCOMING EVENTS

Christmas Eve: December 24 at 6 pm

Holy Mother's Birthday (Janmatithi): December 30 at 11 am

REGULAR PROGRAMMES

SCRIPTURE CLASS: Friday Scripture Classes begin at 7:30 pm, following the regular evening prayer at 6:00 pm. The class, held at the centre, is open to all interested persons.

VIGIL: On Saturday, Nov 10 a vigil consisting of japa and meditation will be observed, from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. To participate, please call the centre at 416-240-7262.

RAM NAM: On Sunday, Nov 11 at 5:00 pm

INTERVIEWS/INSTRUCTION: Swami Kripamayananda will be happy to give interviews to those interested in knowing more about Vedanta and meditation. Individual interviews are also given for spiritual instruction. Appointments for interviews should be made in advance with the Swami at (416) 240-7262.

DAILY MEDITATION: Meditation is observed at the Centre every morning from 6:00 am to 7:00 am.

Devotional singing and meditation is held in the evenings from 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm.

DAILY BREAD FOOD BANK: Many less fortunate families are dependent on the food bank for their daily nutrition. Please help us by contributing non-perishable food items that we may pass along to the Daily Bread Food Bank.

SOUP KITCHEN: This month, the Soup Kitchen will be held on Nov 8, 15 and 20. Please contact the Centre if you are interested in participating. *Donations for the Soup Kitchen will be highly appreciated.*

BOOK STORE: The Book Store is open after Sunday Services and special programmes, and arrangements can be made by phone for weekday and Saturday visits. We carry selected titles from the Ramakrishna Vivekananda literature collections, as well as other Vedantic materials.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Minister and Teacher - Swami Kripamayanda, Ramakrishna Order of India

November 2007

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				<u>1</u>	<u>2</u> 7:30pm Scripture Class: Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna	<u>3</u>
<u>4</u> 11 am Lecture: 'Power of Prayer' 12pm: Sitar recital by Adam Duncan	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>8</u> 9:30am Soup Kitchen	<u>9</u> 6.00 pm KALI PUJA	<u>10</u> 6am-6pm Vigil
<u>11</u> 11 am Lecture: 'WhyFestivals?' 1:30 pm: VVM 5pm:RamNam	<u>12</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>15</u> 9:30am Soup Kitchen	<u>16</u> 7.30 pm Scripture Class: Tattvabodha	<u>17</u>
<u>18</u> 11 am Annual General Meeting	<u>19</u>	<u>20</u> 9:30am Soup Kitchen	<u>21</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>23</u> 7:30 pm Scripture Class: Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna	<u>24</u>
<u>25</u> 11am Guest Lecture: 'Concept God in Sikhism' by Pawan Kumar 1:30pm: VVM	<u>26</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>28</u>	<u>29</u>	<u>30</u> 7:30pm Scripture Class: Tattvabodha	

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Vedanta Society of Toronto's Annual General Meeting will be held on Sunday, **November 18, 2007 at 11:00 am**. Any member wishing to nominate an active and willing member of the Vedanta Society may do so by writing to the Society.

All nominations must be received by November 4, 2007 and be duly proposed and seconded, and approved by Swami Kripamayanda. All our members and friends are requested to attend the meeting. **If you are unable to attend, please fill in the proxy form that is included with this newsletter and send it so that it reaches us before November 18.**