

**Religion and Human Civilization: Thesis, Anti-Thesis and Synthesis**

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**Abstract:** Religion has played a very important role in the evolution of mankind. Philosophy, as a discipline to study mankind takes special care in studying religion. Here the important area of philosophy called “philosophy of religion” plays the key role. Philosophy of religion is a way of study different religions scientifically and rationally. The present global phenomenon witnesses a threat for attitude of the individuals towards their respective religious beliefs. It has been seen institutional religion has become an obstacle in most of the cases for the society as well as the nation state. Probably it is the need of the hour to look back towards the foundation of religious system in human life since the time of pre-human civilization. This work carries a sincere effort to have a revision on origination of religion in primitive stage of human civilization and its transition with changing time. It is a humble attempt to have a rational look on the significance of religion and its role in the changing scenario of human life since its inception.

**Keywords:** Primitive Religion, Institutional Religion, Universal Religion.

**INTRODUCTION**

Religion has been a crucial and all-encompassing feature of human life right through human history. It is said that “The proper study of mankind is man, and the study of man can never be complete unless it includes the study of religion [1]”.

One cannot but admit that religion is most important and outstanding feature of human life. Whoever takes a comprehensive survey of human experience soon discovers that religion has from the earliest time and throughout the ages occupied a central place in life and history. Comte admitted, religion embraces the whole of existence, and the history of religion resumes the entire history of human development[2].” Here it can be imagined what a significant factor the religion is for human life. There can be so many assumptions regarding the origination of religion as a whole i.e. how primitive men acquainted themselves with religion and secondly how the conventional particular religions had been conceived. It is really necessary to study the origination of religion before entering into the conventional religions like Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity etc. Because after being a religious man he will dictate what his respective institutional religion says. He then recognizes ‘God’ as the creator of everything. But before being a conventional religious man it is to be examined “is it the human being who had created the religion, and if it is so, is it the human being who had created God according to their own choice, the important element of all religions?” Human beings are separated from other living beings in the world because of its distinctive nature i.e. its rationality (or higher intelligence). Now question is, “is the religion (primitive or institutional) a product of human intelligence or human emotion?” If it is the first one

then how religion can be so dogmatic? Again if it is the second one should human follow so rigidly the conventional religious system? Another relevant issue is the advantage or need of religion in primitive as well the present age. It is the time to see “is the advantage of religion has become less than its disadvantage and was it opposite in the primitive time?” Present global scenario says, the whole world has been suffering from the misinterpretation or dogmatism (if it is not side effect) of religion. Religion has become a very easy means to exploit the masses for politicians, terrorists, religious leaders or other hypocrite. In both the traditions Indian and western lots of thinkers have tried recover the conventional religions from any kind wrong-interpretation. In this work a humble attempt has been made to see the significance of religion in human civilization since its inception to till date.

**METHODOLOGY**

This work proceeds through analytic method. It is mainly based on secondary sources like text books, reference books, journals, internet etc. After using the sources mentioned rational analysis has been made on the issue.

It is a general perception for all that there are large numbers of meticulous researchers in the field of Anthropology, the history of religion, the comparative study of religion, the psychology of religion, and in the study of human life and culture, who have accumulated

an enormous facts about origin of religions, religious rites, customs, activities, beliefs, sentiments, aspirations of man and of communities. Philosophy, which claims to be the zenith of the whole process of intellectual inquiry, cannot rest satisfied with a mere accumulation of facts as such rather it seeks to apprehend its ultimate meaning, validity and ground of concerned subject. Same is the case regarding the religion as a whole. This discipline maintains its branch which is called "Philosophy of Religion" which discusses everything about religion without any biasness towards any particular sectional religion. Its study area covers the issues like origin of religion, merit and demerit of different religions, comparative study of different religions, God- arguments for its existence, religious faith, religious experience, revelation etc. Here it is to be mentioned that Philosophy of Religion is not a particular type of religion, rather it is the way of study different religions rationally and scientifically.

It is a common phenomenon that religion has become a very complicated and sensitive issue at the verge of 21<sup>st</sup> century. The masses around the globe are being gradually separated in the name of their respective institutional religion. India is not an exception of that. Here philosophy the parent discipline of all has to play a role. Philosophy of religion since the past has tried to uncover the true picture of religion before the society. It has covered all the issues starting from the origin of religion without any conventional religious biasness. Let us proceed to see how Philosophy of Religion has dealt with the issue of religion.

### **Origin and development of religion**

As it is already hinted the main task of philosophy of religion is to explain the nature and function of religion. It has to show everything about religion. It tries to see the problem of historical and psychological origin and development of religion. If we learn from anthropologist, the psychologist, and the historian how and why man came to be a religious being, as well as how and why religion developed from its crude beginnings to its highest forms, then we are on the high-road to a solution of the problems as to what religion essentially is and what purpose it has in human life[3].

Here it is worthy mention that the question of origin of religion was not scientifically studied until modern times. Till then there were two views prevalent about its origin. The first view considers religion as the divine revelation. This view has held prominent place in Jewish, Christian and Islamic theologies. It has usually taken the form of a belief in a primeval monotheism of divine origin, from which polytheism in its many forms is a later degeneration. This view is however crudely psychological one. It makes revelation to be purely an act of God, and does not help us to understand how it was conditioned by the nature and experience of man,

how it was psychologically mediated. The great thinker in the west here criticized this fact as if religion were to be derived from an historical communication from God, men would have to be conceived as without religion before that communication, and that if we admit an original atheism of human consciousness, it would remain inconceivable how such a consciousness could have received a revelation from God. The problem would still remain unsolved, if not insoluble, how could a mere external revelation get religion into a mind which had no religious constitution or content [4]?

The second view is that of the so called English Deists of the eighteenth century. These thinkers rejected the first view and advocate the origin of religion in human reason. The fundamental doctrine of religion, such as the being of God, the immortality of the soul, the authority of the moral law are truths of reason which can be established with the certainty of mathematical truth and which constitute the natural religion which is the common element in all varied religions of the world. This religion of reason is natural to man and therefore known to him from the beginning. But through the cunning devices of the priests, whose one object was to exploit the fears and credulity of the masses in order to get them under their control, elaborate superstitious beliefs and ritual practices came everywhere to take the place of the simple religion of reason. Here, of course, how reason could establish the existence of God, immortality of soul etc. is another issue [5].

Now let us put aside the above pre-scientific views and proceed to discuss some more important views on origin of religion. Here we can have two types of view related to it. These are 1) Anthropological view, 2) Psychological view. The first one mainly concern with the human history related to the origin of religion. How did religion first appear in time and place, in what way did the religious nature of man first appeared, what was the most rudimentary form of religion, from which all other forms may be said to have developed? On the other hand the issues in psychological view is how and why human beings had mentally got ready to accept religion, what were the impulses, promptings, motives, needs which led him to apprehend the supernatural and to adjust his life with it? These two views again have some sub-sections.

Under anthropological view there are many theories like animism, ghost theory, totemism, theory of mana, magic etc. Let us have a brief idea about these theories.

### **Animism**

*E.B. Taylor in his famous book "Primitive Culture" (1871) puts forward the view that animism in some form or other was the earliest form of religion. According to Taylor at a certain level of culture man everywhere attributed some kind of 'soul' or 'spirit' to*

*the different phenomena of nature. The sun, the moon, the stars, trees, mountains, brooks, rivers, and all the different objects of nature were believed to be animated by some kind of spirit or other. Primitive man ascribed some kind of psychical activity to all the diverse objects of nature, and religion, Taylor contends, arose out of this.*

#### **Ghost theory**

*Herbert Spencer propounds the theory of ancestor-worship or ghost-worship as the earliest type of religion. The origin of religion, he says, is to be found in the worship of dead ancestors re-appearing in the form of ghosts. According to Spencer, animism is not original but derivative, being a generalized form of the belief in the spirits of dead ancestors reappearing as ghosts and choosing certain objects in nature as their dwelling place. From the worship of ghosts the primitive people could develop the generalized notion of spirit-worship as such.*

#### **Totemism**

*One section of anthropologists speaks of totemism as the earliest form of religion. It is allied to ancestor-worship and is found in certain parts of the world especially in North America, Africa and Australia. The typical feature or the distinguishing mark of totemism is the "alliance of a clan with an animal (or plant or natural object) species[6]." A 'totem' is usually a species of animals to which a clan or a special group stands in some very intimate relation; the 'totem' may sometimes be a plant and very rarely a class of inanimate object. It is generally believed that the members of a group or clan concerned owe their origin to the 'totem', so that totem in this sense may be looked upon as the remoter ancestor –it provides the members of the social group with a group name[7].*

#### **The concept of mana**

*Another important interpretation of origin of religion is the theory of 'mana'. Recent anthropology tends more and more to find the origin of religion, in common with magic, in a pre-animistic period or stage characterized by a sense of awe in the presence of a diffused, indefinable, mysterious power or powers not regarded as personal. The word 'mana' for the first time initiated by Bishop Codrington in his book "The Melanesians" in 1891. In this book, he explicated 'mana' as an all pervading supernatural power distinguished from natural quality and ordinary physical character of things; a kind of limitless power which manifests itself in unexpected things and events. The primitive man believed 'mana' as a supernatural power dwells at the back of all natural happenings, for their safety life they worshipped 'mana'. In this way, concept of religion is come into sight in the mind of the primitive people and the practice of worship be started.*

#### **Magic theory**

*The anthropological survey of primitive religions raises an important question as to the relation between magic and religion. As magic is associated with various primitive rites and ceremonies and as there is some lingering trace of magic even in the practices of some modern religions, it is enquired how religion and magic influence each other and whether one is prior to the other.*

The above brief study of the origin of religion in the light of anthropological research ought to help us when we come to consider the nature and function of religion, including its meaning for us to day. For we are psychologically as well as physically continuous with primitive man as Darwin also said, far though we have travelled away from him.

Like anthropological theory there is a psychological aspect behind the origination of religion. Religion is not simply a matter of objective study, but it is also a matter of experience. It is necessary to compare different religions and should mainly enquire whether we are entitled to speak of a common religious instinct or faculty and should see what psychological factors play a common role in the different religions. In short it is necessary to find out what psychological factors prompt man to religion as such. Usually it is seen that we do not draw a sharp line of distinction between the problem of origin and the problem of development. Origin and development belong together; they are psychologically continuous. There is a genetic relation between the earliest and latest stage of religion. There is a psychological identity in all religious experience. It is sometimes said that the psychological origin of religion lies in a religious instinct and this accounts for the similarity of religions. It is presumed that the primitive man were in perplexing stage of mind after perceiving the mystery of nature. Sometimes they afraid of, in other time they surprised or wonder to see the natural phenomenon. If they felt that certain phenomenon seemed to be stronger then they surrendered or tried to satisfy it. So it can be a surrendering instinct in the side of man from which religion was adopted psychologically.

In this context the famous psychologist Sigmund Freud's view on nature of religion can be mentioned. Freud regarded religious beliefs as "illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most insistent wishes of mankind [8]." According to Freud, Religion is a mental defense against the more threatening aspects of nature—earthquake, flood, storm, disease and inevitable death. With these forces nature rises up against us, majestic, cruel and inexorable. But the human imagination transforms these forces into mysterious personal powers [9].

### Transition from primitive religion to conventional religion

It is a very important point to mention here that the primitive man started their religious speculations from the natural appearances. In that level of intellectual as well as emotional development they tried to explain the mystery of natural phenomena through their own interpretation. Amidst this effort, it can be accepted, the seeds of religion were implanted in human history. The primitive man translated what he does not understand into an action of spirit which is equally unintelligible. Sickness and frenzy, trance and hysteria, are explained through possession by a spirit. For example the Negro [10] interprets the cure of a disease by medicine, by saying that the spirit of medicine expels the spirit of disease. Hence primitive man's gods never explain things in our sense of the word 'explain'; and this because primitive thought is untroubled by the need of finding connection and coherency within experience. The organic and the inorganic, man and animal, mind and matter, are fused together and treated as if there was no essential distinction between them. Man may spring from an animal; the spirit of a tree may become incarnate in a human being; and these beliefs are even widely current among uncivilized tribes, and are received and repeated without incredulity. It is keeping with this fusion of the material and the spiritual that the gods of primitive religion are not spiritual beings in our sense of the word; they are more or less materially conceived. At the stage of primitive religion, man has not really liberated himself from the necessity of finding and embodying the object of his religious belief in some perceived thing.

The crudeness of early thinking has its counterpart in the crudeness of the motives which moved man at this low stage of development. Man's desires can never be better than the needs of which he is conscious; and at the primitive level he was engaged in a constant struggle with nature and in a frequent conflict with other tribes. Hence the gods he sought through religion were the reflection of the wants of his daily life.

Now the question is how from this primitive religion the present system of the same has been developed? It is a well-known fact that men's mind (or brain) is ever evolving, so it is obvious that they are not stagnant in one stage. Same can be the fact in case of its transition from primitive stage of religion to the present stage of it. It can be imagined that the mentality primitive man was too undeveloped (if not narrow) and poor to form a wide social life as well as a broad religious system. E.B. Taylor said, "Savage animism is almost devoid of that ethical element which to the educated modern mind is the main spring of practical religion."<sup>(11)</sup> At the same time it would be wrong to suppose that early religion does contain within it the germs of something better. Ethical ideas imply a

personal development which did not then exist anymore than it exists in the child of tender years.

In contrast to the primitive religion, the present religious system reveals a very great enlargement of the outlook and a significant deepening of the content of the religious consciousness. It is a fact that the growth of the society or the nation involves a widening of man's mental horizon, and the rise of a larger and more complex social order brings about a distinct advance in the personal consciousness. Through interaction with other selves within a wider social system, man makes progress in individuality. One of the results here may be the transcendence of the old naturalistic limitations.

From these discussions it can be imagined that there is a limitation in primitive society. It represented a narrow form of social order. The primitive life at the outset was hard and constant struggle for existence against an inhospitable nature and hostile human groups. But gradually due to the evolutionary development it had got the opportunity to cultivate and left the roaming life. Now he had got a stable means of subsistence which delivers him from the fear of immediate want and enough leisure time to reflect on things and create philosophy. The same effect is on their religion itself. It is on the civilized level the crude religion gradually developed to an ethical and reflective religion. When man learned to cultivate the ground and to draw his food supply from it, he secured a stable and plentiful means of support, and this made possible a denser population and a more highly organized society. Gradually with the emergence of the city and the civic order on earth man came into his proper kingdom, achieved the fruition of his higher faculty. He could now reveal himself as a being of "large discourse", which could look before and after, and to consider the meaning and purpose of his life as a whole. This advancement had great impact on the development of religion.

### Difference between primitive and developed religion

The important characteristics which distinguish present religious system from primitive one may be traced to the higher social order and needs which flow from it. The savage can worship the vague and formless spirit; the civilized man demands some better object of reverence. In contrast to the gods of primitive religion, the gods of the present religion have name and character, and they are endowed with a variety of attributes and functions. The realization of religion in the form of a personal relation between worshiper and worshipped now begins to be possible. Secondly, the growth of human character in civilized life leads to the acquirement of the moral virtues, and these are now ascribed to the gods. Judged by our own standards, the gods of the prevalent religion are often not all that we could wish them to be, but they are certainly better than their distant ancestors' were [12]. While the gods at this stage are humanized, they are

also idealized; they come to be represented as types of human excellence. Along with the idealization of gods the present religious system tries to elevate gods above the world. They become less familiar beings, and more the objects of reverence; they are no longer entangled with the things of earth, but dwell in a higher region. The very important characteristics of the present religion are spiritualization of feelings, different religious doctrines, spiritual worship and religious life, the individual and the religious community etc.

### **Prevalent institutional religions**

The prominent prevalent institutional religions of world are Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism etc. Here is an effort to have a very brief idea about three major religions of the world.

#### **Christianity**

Of all the Semitic religions, Christianity has proved to be the most influential and has dominated a large population of the world, especially the western world. This religion has its origin in the teachings of Jesus, a Jew by birth and reported to be born of a virgin mother, Mary. The time of this religion is 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. as it is started from the time of Jesus. The religion seems to be essentially monotheistic, though the idea of Trinity found in it sometimes raises doubts.

#### **Hinduism**

Hinduism is perhaps the oldest of all the living religions. It has neither any definite date of its origin nor has it any definite founder with it. It is called *Sanatana dharma*, a religion coming down to people through eternity. It is polytheistic, monotheistic, monistic—all at the same time.

#### **Islam**

Islam is a prophetic religion of a comparatively late origin. It has its origin in the teachings of Prophet Mohammad (570 A.D.), which is taken by its followers as the messenger of God (Allah). Islam believes in one and only one God, called 'Allah'. It is, therefore, out and out a monotheistic religion.

If all the religions are properly studied, then it will be found the metaphysical as well as ethical part of all the religions is more or less same. All the religions are somehow, this way or that the advocate of humanism. In the name of any metaphysical realities no religions advocates the division or degradation among the masses. This is the true picture of all the religions. Now the question is why there are problems or conflict in the name of religions.

#### **Religion: the threat for human civilization?**

From the very beginning of human race in the earth or since the time of pre-civilization religion has been playing an organic role for humanity. Without the discussion of religion the proper understanding human

civilization cannot be completed. So, it can be said religion always has a positive impact on human life. But the successive history of human civilization also shows us the other side of the picture. Lots of war had been taken place in the name of religion which is a shame for greater human civilization. Conflict in the name of religion shows the ignorance of the past or originality of religion.

The present global scenario shows us that the minds of majority of people have been polluted by respective religious sentiments even after being highly educated. Almost all the country has been suffering from terrorism conducted in the name of religion. Unfortunately India is also not an exception of that. Here, sometimes it is seen the religious sentiments have overtaken the national sentiments. It is a threat for democracy of a secular country like India that some political parties have been indirectly formed in the name of religions.

#### **Preventive measures**

Religion is a way of life which is not made by the institutional God. The divisions of religion can never be rationalized. Yet the divisions and differentiations are prevalent in the name of religion among the masses. With the passing time the problem has become more complex. Political agenda definitely is one of the important causes. Now the question is what will be its preventive measures.

#### **Universal religion**

According to Vivekananda it is necessary to distinguish between true religion and what may be called institutional religion. In fact objections against religion arise because people identify religion with institutions. Sects and institutions set unnecessary limits to religion. He says that true religion must be above these reparative and disruptive tendencies. True love must be universal. This, according to Vivekananda, represents the essence of true religion. He was talking about the application of Vedanta philosophy in our practical life. Through the theory Vedantic-monism he was trying to establish the inner unity among the people. His view of Practical Vedanta can be said as the base of his idea of Universal Religion.

#### **Tagore's humanism**

R. N. Tagore was talking about humanity as the centre of all religions. He stresses the ideal of human unity. Man's true worship lies in his unceasing endeavor to reveal the divinity hidden within him. If man were perfect in his nature, then religion would have no meaning. Man's inner higher nature often comes in conflict with his other lower or brute nature. Religion enables man to reconcile this conflict by subordinating the lower nature to the higher one[13].

### **Philosophy of religion**

As it is mentioned in the outset of this work, Philosophy of religion is not a particular type of religion; rather it is the scientific study of different religions and its concepts. As a branch of philosophy it rationally studies merit and demerits of different religions and advice suggestive measure for betterment of the society at large.

### **Comparative religion**

Like philosophy of religion comparative religion also is a way of studying different religions. It has the same agenda like philosophy of religion. It comparatively studies different religions and its respective concepts so that there can be the ways for inter-religious dialogues. It is well known fact that the inter-religious dialogue can play a significant role in understanding other religions and as a result to create harmony among the religions.

### **Proper understanding of the background of religion**

Right study of background of religious system in human life is much needed for all. From proper knowledge man will realize that religion is a result of human evolution since its inception. At the primitive stage it was the result of human need and situation for which religion first incepted. Afterwards with the development of human civilization it has changed its color. Here one thing is to be remembered none institutional religion is created by God. The section is made by man only. So the division amidst the religion is not original rather artificial. So there is no reason to glorify one and condemn the other. This realization can be drawn through proper knowledge of the background of religious system.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is a fact that dichotomy in life is not a new phenomenon. Rather it is the unavoidable feature of the nature at large. So far the history reach the clash of 'thesis' and 'anti-thesis' can be traced. Same is the case in religion. But there should always be an effort to synthesize these two. The interesting fact in case of religion is that majority of the people do not know what religion is, how it has entered in to the human life only by leaving other creatures or what is its role in the human life as well as in the world. For understanding these facts a proper study of human history as well as its civilization is much needed. Here it is to be remembered that religion has never been a complete business of emotion. If it would have been so, then other animals also would have their own religions. But this is not the fact. It implies human rationality also had a role in creation of religion connected with their respective need of hour. It is the human beings who are sole responsible for creating as well as differentiating all the religions. Religion definitely has important role in human life as history shows but it should not be considered as something more than the life in earth.

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