

PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION AND SRI AUROBINDO

Phenomenological approach to religion provides us with criteria for analysing cultures and understanding religious practices. The advantage of this method of study is that the criteria enable us to do justice to all religions and cultures, recognising their contribution to human civilization without being prejudiced by one's own traditional value standards. The phenomenological approach to religion, thus, attempts to define religion, to isolate its essential elements, to discern its general pattern and universal elements that provide the basis for religious belief and practice.

A German writer Rudolf Otto declared in 1917 that the phenomenon of "the holy" is the unique factor universally found in all religions. He was followed by Mircea Eliade who used the terms the *sacred* and the *profane* to describe the essence which pervades all forms and structures of religion. The sacred is the dynamic element in *hierophanies*—experiences in which one becomes aware that the holy has manifested itself. Martin Buber (1875–1965), a German-Israeli theologian, however, took a different view of the essence of religion. He analysed the human personality in accordance to our two ways of viewing it and the two primary words we utter : I—Thou and I—It. In I—Thou usage a creative event of a relation takes place where I confronts another being as Thou. The I is created by its differentiation with the Thou, just as the Thou, on its part, is created by its recognition of the I.

In the second primary word I—It, It is cognised by the I as a thing to be known, used and experienced. A human being may be reduced to the status of an It when he is deprived of his freedom dominated, or exploited. Conversely, an inanimate object may take on the character of a Thou when the holy manifests itself through it. Buber advanced his theory of religion in an effort to

strengthen man's freedom and autonomy threatened by the ever increasing machanism of Man's everyday living. He maintained that the self was free only in the I—Thou relationship, in which one enters into true spiritual life. In every such instance of relationship man touches the fringe of The Eternal Thou, which truly created man and makes him a *real* person. This Buberian theory of religion is analogous to the Upanishadic declaration that "I am He, Thou art That, O Svetaketu, All this is the Brahman, this Self is the Brahman."

Another contemporary theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965) proclaimed the universal essence of religion as Faith, not simply as a creed, but something as ultimate concern implying an ultimate reality. Faith confronts man with a "demand, a threat, and a promise." It demands submission of the will to what one regards as ultimate; it threatens dire consequences to those who reject its demand; and it promises fulfillment to all who accept it. The fulfillment offered by the Faith is realisation of the fullness of being. The Indian tradition described this phenomenon as *purnata* or *purnatva* attained at the end of the religious fulfillment. Sri Aurobindo declared : "To know, possess and be the divine being in an animal and egoistic consciousness...where there is only a stress of transitory satisfactions besieged by physical pain and emotional suffering, to establish an infinite freedom in a world which presents itself as a group of mechanical necessities,... to realise the immortal life in a body subjected to death and constant mutation,...this is offered to us as the manifestation of God in matter...It manifests itself in the divination of Godhead, the impulse towards perfection, the search after pure truth and unmixed bliss, the sense of a secret immortality."¹

An analysis of the mythologies found in all world cultures demonstrates validity of the phenomenological approach. A myth is a story about a supernatural figure who plays a role in human history as if he himself were indeed a human being. Creation stories of the Hindu tradition as well as of other peoples are

examples of this element; so too are stories that detect the presence of gods in the inanimate phenomena of the natural world or in those of the human personality, as is the case with our legends of *avatars*. The western mythologies of the Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans are comparable with those of India's Puranic ones and others of the oriental peoples.

From our point of view, mythology could be dismissed as a kind of religious fiction. But this fiction, like any literary fiction, serves a definite purpose. The gods are presented in the myths with many of the characteristics of human beings along with certain superhuman qualities. In other words, for certain social motif some humans are upgraded with attributes of superhuman beings and thus endowed with cosmic superhuman force, either due to some *siddhis*, yogic practice, mantra-power or inherent in their divine birth. In both the cases, the attained and the inherent, the divinity of the superman is inevitably connected with the basic question of leading and liberating men from chaos and disorder to safety of order and peace.

This element of religion appears in Sri Aurobindo's description of the French lady who heads his Ashram at Pondichery :

"The Supramental change is a thing decreed and inevitable in the evolution of the earth-consciousness; for its upward ascent is not ended and mind is not the last summit. But that the change may arrive, take form and endure, there is needed the call from below with a will to recognise and not deny the Light when it comes, and there is needed the sanction of the Supreme from above. (Above ? From the Mars ?) The power that mediates between the sanction and the call is the presence and power of the Divine Mother. The Mother's power and not any human endeavour and *tapasya* can alone rend the lid and tear the covering and shape the vessel and bring down into this world of obscurity and falsehood and death and suffering Truth and Light and Life divine and immortal's Ananda."²

The most important function of religion, is however, similar to that of society, that is *nomisation*. The anthropological presupposition for this is a human craving for *meaning* that appears to have the force of instinct. It seems that man is congenitally compelled to impose a meaningful order upon reality. And this order presupposes the social enterprise of ordering 'world-construction.' Isolation from society exposes us to manifold dangers and in the extreme case to the danger of imminent destruction. Separation from society also creates unbearable psychological tensions. The ultimate danger of such separation, is, however, the danger of meaninglessness. Peter Berger in his thesis *The Sacred Canopy* calls this danger "the nightmare *par excellence*, in which the individual is submerged in a world of disorder, senselessness and madness."³

Reality and identity become meaningless figures of horror whereas to be *in* the society is meant to be *sane* and thence, being protected from the *insanity* of such anomic terror. Berger explains this sheltering quality of social order by the instances of the *marginal situations* in which we are driven close to or beyond the boundaries of the order that determines our routine, everyday existence.

Dreams and fantasies fall in this category of marginal situations. They appear on the horizon of consciousness as haunting suspicions that the world may have another aspect than its *normal* one, that is, that previously accepted definitions of reality may not be true. Such suspicions extend to the identity of both self and others, I and Thou—*aham* and *tvam*—posting the possibility of destroying metamorphoses. When these suspicions affect the central areas of consciousness they create the constellations that are called *neurotic* or *psychotic* by the contemporary psychiatry. Whatever may be the epistemological status of these neurotic states, their profound terror lies in the threat they constitute to our previously operative *nomos*. The marginal situation *par excellence*, however, is death. When we witness the death of others, specially of those

who are important to us, we anticipate our own death. And we are forced to question the *ad hoc* cognitive and normative operating procedures of our *normal* social existence. Thus, *kala*, Time, the End or Death confronts us with a formidable problem not only because of its obvious threat to our existing human relationships, but because it threatens the very basic assumptions of our social order.

In the Indian traditional wisdom, this phenomenon has been described in the Mahabharata as one of the greatest wonders. That is that man witnesses death everyday and yet plans to continue to exist in his social order for eternity. And for this reason, all religious movements have their origination in the death situation with which their founders were confronted. The Buddha's renunciation of the world was propelled by his witnessing death, old-age, and suffering, and his desire to ward off such miseries before they invade his own self. Sri Aurobindo's turn to the spiritual path too, mysteriously found its origination in such a marginal situation. Before becoming a mystic yogi, he was a fiery freedom fighter in the early decade of this century. Then, he declared "Nationalism a religion that has come to India from God... Nationalism is immortal; Nationalism cannot die; because it is no human being, it is God who is working in Bengal."⁴ Subsequently, he was arrested on May 2, 1908 and was released on May 9, 1909. That was the only such experience for Sri Aurobindo and he wrote that on his arrest "I was shaken in my faith." And Lord Krishna spoke to him face to face in the British prison cell twice; first he ordered him to save the nation. Then, on the second *darshan* God asked him to follow the path of the *sanatan dharma*. Other compatriots arrested with Sri Aurobindo were sentenced to death or life imprisonment.⁵ He believed, therefore, that his acquittal was God's design just as his imprisonment was and he took the path of "higher" wisdom vis-a-vis the God's Religion of Nationalism.⁶

Seen in the perspective of religious nomos, every defined *reality* is an area of meaning carved out of a vast mass of meaninglessness,

a small clearing of lucidity, as it were, in a formless, dark, always ominous jungle of *irrealities*. In the face of death and destruction, thus, religion, the *sanatan dharma*, the eternal faith, offers the individual the bright "dayside" of life, hope and future. Religion not unlike society is a human enterprise by which a sacred reality of cosmos is constructed. By sacred is meant here a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet somehow related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objective experience. In the phenomenology of religion, the sacred plays a significant role, and as Berger describes it "something extraordinary and potentially dangerous, though its dangers can be domesticated and its potency harnessed to the needs of everyday life." The idea of the sacred has its antonym in chaos. The opposition of the two is frequently expressed in a variety of cosmogonic myths. But postulation of such a sacred cosmos offers man's ultimate hope against the terror of anomy and death. Only what is required of man is a *right* relationship with the sacred cosmos to assure him against the nightmare threats of chaos. And to drop out of such a *right* relationship is to be abandoned on the edge of the abyss of meaninglessness.

It is interesting and not at all irrelevant to observe here that the English "chaos" derives from a Greek word meaning "yawning" and "religion" from a Latin one meaning "to be careful." The Sanskrit term *dharma* derives from the root *dhri* meaning "to preserve" or "to maintain." To be certain what the religious man is *careful* about and *preserve* himself is above all the dangerous power inherent in the manifestation of the sacred reality. That is the idea that the individual may lose all connection with the sacred and be swallowed up by chaos and death. All the religious reality is constructed and designed to keep this terror at bay. Sri Aurobindo's visionary experiences in the prison cell when analysed in view of this phenomenological criteria of religion, reveal an interesting human aspect of that great soul.

Religion has played a strategic role in the human enterprise of world-building. Religion implies the farthest possible reach of man's self-externalisation, of his infussion of reality with his own *meanings*—imagination and fantasies. In other words, religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe—known and unknown—is and is-not—as being humanly significant and meaningful, and that man has a control over it. Whether it is plausible and reasonable, that is not our concern here. What is asserted is that such is the claim and attempt made by all religions. However, the most sacred cosmos when analysed reveals a mere collection of normative statements. And even where the religious men claim their books under the title of *philosophy* they contain little or no original cognitive statements. Religion has, of course, served society as an effective instrument of legitimation, where legitimation maintained socially defined reality. And religion legitimates so effectively because it relates the precarious reality of constructions of societies with the ultimate reality. For this reason, society through religion attempts to ensure the future continuation of the institutional order, now established *ex nihilo*. It is for this very reason that all religious orders are so presented and interpreted as to hide, as much as possible, their constructed character. The attempts are made to make believe that which has been stamped out of the ground *ex nihilo* appear as the manifestation of something that has been existent from the beginning of time immemorial.

Shankaracharya in the 7th century, therefore, called his constructed system *Vedanta*, the end of the Vedic Wisdom, and linked his writings with the 1,000 year old ideas of the Upanishads. And all racial and religious wars among the nations are fought on the basis of thousands years old primitive belief and legends ! Imagine, a young US soldier, recently migrated to Israel, holding a 'made in U.S.A. weapon, and weeping at the Western Wall⁷ in an occupied Arab land of Jordan. Sri Aurobindo has been proclaimed as the Sage, the Seer, and Kavi of the Vedas.

Religion legitimates social institutions by bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by *locating* them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference. The historical facts pertaining to human activity are viewed from a vantage point that, in their own self-definition, they transcend both history and man. Probably the most ancient form of such a legitimation is the conception of the institutional order as directly reflecting or manifesting the divine structure and design of the cosmos, that is, the conception of the relationship between society and cosmos as one between microcosm and macrocosm. Everything "here below" has its analogue "up above". By participating in the institutional religious order men, *ipso facto*, participating in the divine cosmos. Thus in the phenomenology of religion, the authority is conceived as the agent of the gods, or ideally even as a divine incarnation. The Head of State, or the Church, the Pope, the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram are recognised as the Supreme Law.

In all nations, the large masses of people continue to conceive of society in essentially archaic terms down to our own time and regardless of the transformations in the *official* definitions or reality the religious view of the world remains un-altered. In India, the notion of *dharma* as used in the Gita, as caste duty or the social duty (as differentiated from the other usage of the term *dharma-yuddha*=holy war=jihad) as relating the individual to the universal order of the universe has survived most of the radical re-interpretations of its meaning. Whereas Dr. Billy Graham, the Chief Priest of the Nixon administration, has proclaimed that the Biblical prophesies are about to take place and that the earth is getting ready for the Second Coming, for which the US. must keep up its "pressure" upon the Communists in Vietnam. Sri Aurobindo's followers are declaring that the American astronauts have seen Light in the Indian Ocean south of the Bay of Bengal !

In the modern frame of reference, psychology and anthropological analysis have replaced almost all religious conceptualisations. All the same, where religion continues to be meaningful as an

interpretation of existence, its definitions of reality must somehow be able to account for the fact that there are different spheres of reality in the ongoing experience of everyone. In the face of death situation, religion makes it possible for its follower to have "a good death", that is, to die while retaining to the end a meaningful relationship with the *nomos* of one's society—subjectively meaningful to oneself and objectively meaningful in the minds of others. Hence, in the Gita, Krishna says to Arjuna that if "you die fighting you will go to the heavens," and killing under the auspices of the legitimate authorities has, for this reason, been accompanied from ancient times to today by religious paraphernalia and ritualism. Nations go to war and men are put to death amid prayers, blessing, and incantations. The ecstasies of fear and violence are by these means made workable, and we are kept withing the bounds of sanity.

The same human activity that produces society also produces religion and the relation between the two products is always a 'dialectical one.' Thus it is quite possible that in a certain historical development a social process is the effect of a particular religious ideation. At another development the reverse may be the case. The implication of the rootage of religion in human activity is *not* that religion is always a dependent variable in the history of a society, but rather that it derives its objective and subjective reality from human beings, who produce and reproduce it in their ongoing social enterprise. And this entails the fact of "social engineering." For anyone who wishes to maintain the reality (or myth) of a particular religious system, he must maintain and if necessary fabricate an appropriate religious structure, a system, a Church, a Sangha. Sri Aurobindo established his organisational centres around the world and his followers have now launched a programme of a massive Auroville city to perpetuate Sri Aurobindo's religious preachings and to sustain his doctrines of reality and yoga and continue to guide the mankind at home and abroad.⁸

Religion is like every human endeavour, in the final analysis, a joint enterprise of men against the threat of death. The power of religion, therefore, depends upon the credibility of its founder and preachers to offer the society the best prescription in the face of death. Or more accurately, to place the best banner in the hands of men as they walk inevitably towards the snare of *kala* or Death. In this task, a new religion, a religion appropriate for the 21st century must take into account all possible discoveries of the new human activity. In our search of Truth and challenge of death, we cannot ignore the principles of biology, chemistry and the discoveries of the laws of the physics. The feasibility of creating a living cell out of non-living matter surely will radically alter the presupposition of "threat of death" as the basis of religious hold on the mind of men.

An ongoing religion and a forward looking faith cannot and must not rest upon the sandy foundation of fear and threats of the inevitable; it must be grounded on the sound pillars of *knowledge*, reason and the discovery of truth. The Upanishadic thinkers declared this phenomenon by saying that *satyam sraddhayam juhuyat* that is, the faith must be accompanied with truth seeking. And Manu had proclaimed that *yastarkena anusanddhatte sa dharmam ved netarah*, that is, one who follows the path of reason discovers the faith, not by blind following. And the Buddha warned his followers against following him blindly and said "test every proposition for yourself." In contrast, the Compassionate Sri Aurobindo arduously thinks and reasons for his disciples, and offers a well-planned path to Liberation :

"It is not for personal greatness that I am seeking to bring down the Supermind. I care nothing for greatness or littleness in the human sense. I am seeking to bring some principle of inner Truth, Light, Harmony, Peace into the earth-consciousness; I see it above (where ? on the Mars !) and know what it is—I feel it ever gleaming down on my consciousness from above and I am seeking

to make it possible for it to take up the whole being into its own native power, instead of the nature of man continuing to remain in half-light, half-darkness. I believe the descent of this Truth opening the way to a development of divine consciousness here to be the final sense of the earth evolution. If greater men than myself have not had this vision and this ideal before them, that is no reason why I should not follow my Truth-sense and Truth-vision. If human reason regards me as fool for trying to do what Krishna did not try, I do not in the least care. There is no question of X or Y or anybody else in that. It is a question between the Divine and myself—whether it is the Divine Will or not, whether I am sent to bring that down or open the way for its descent or at least make it more possible or not.”⁹

Shri Aurobindo Ghosh at a mature age of 78 passed away on December 5, 1950. The Mother (his long associate and closest friend, originally a French lady) and his followers called his death “The Great Withdrawal : Self-chosen, and Self-willed.”

On December 7, Sri Aurobindo, the Supermind gave assurances to the Mother and Her assurance to the Earth is recorded : “Lord, this morning Thou hast given me the assurance that Thou wouldst stay with us until Thy work is achieved, not only as a consciousness which guides and illumines but also as a dynamic Presence in action. In unmistakable terms Thou hast promised that all of Thyself would remain here and not leave the earth-atmosphere until earth is transformed....”¹⁰

On December 8, the Mother implored Sri Aurobindo to resuscitate and He, as reported by Sisirkumar Mitra, “clearly answered : I have left this body purposely. I will not take it back. I shall manifest again in the first supramental body built in the supramental way.”¹¹

On December 9, He was given the last rites. Charismatic phenomenology of religion has been associated with Shri Ghose’s

body and his ashramites have reported that "after he had withdrawn from it, the body remained aglow, surcharged with a concentration of Light, defying decomposition to the bewilderment of medical science and the reversal of Nature's law for more than 111 hours." Such religious phantasmagoria claims prove nothing. For, if the principle exemplified by the glow of the dead body is that the spirit or the soul is superior to the matter and the body belongs to the category of substance, then, why not the spirit or soul "glow" without the body? If the dichotomy of soul and matter is valid, and matter cannot violate the laws of the spirit—and this is so far the best argument of the spiritualist against the empirical epistemology—then, it implies that the spirit also cannot violate the laws of matter. How then can the spirit keep a dead body—a mass of earth—"glow" beyond the permissible period by the laws of decomposition? One can see clearly another example of legitimisation of the religious fantasies and an attempt to legitimise religious claims to constructed reality of the supra-natural being. Otherwise there is little philosophical and epistemic significance in such religious experiences.

The religious metamorphism becomes further pronounced in the Mother's declaration that "since the beginning of earth history, Sri Aurobindo has always presided over the great earthly transformations, under one form or another, one name or another. The birth of Sri Aurobindo is an eternal birth. . . What Sri Aurobindo represents in the world's history is not a teaching, not even a revelation, it is a decisive action direct from the Supreme."¹²

During 1966-67, when the bombing of Vietnam was at its most intensive enormity, the Mother had a "vision" that the whole world is going as quick as possible towards its golden transformation, as directed by the Supermind of Sri Aurobindo.¹³

Perhaps India and the world can derive better insight and deeper knowledge of religious and social phenomena by analysing the personal life history and works of the Late Shri Aurobindo Ghosh in the frame of reference of the scientific methodology as applied

to psychology and anthropology of our times. Failure to do that will simply end in rendering an extremely interesting life story of a great visionary of our times into a meaningless religious legend.

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NOTES

1. Quoted by Sisirkumar Mitra, *The Liberator Sri Aurobindo - India and the World*. (Bombay; Jaico Publishing House, 1970) (hereinafter *Libt.*), pp. 232 ff.
2. Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother*. (Pondicherry : Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 8th edition, 1956), pp. 83-85.
3. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*. (New York : Doubleday & Co., Anchor Books, 1969), pp- 29-51 on 'Religion and World-Maintenance.'
4. Mitra. *Libt.*, p. 109.
5. *ibid.*, p. 146. See also, Sri Aurobindo, *Speeches* (Pondicherry : Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1952). pp. 56-7.
6. See *The Integral Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo* edited by Haridas Chaudhari and Frederic Spiegelberg. (A Commemorative Symposium volume), (London : Georga Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1960). p. 215
7. The Western Wall in Old Jerusalem was occupied by Israeli soldiers in the June war 1967, believing that the return to the wall was destined 2,000 years ago by the Jewish God.
8. Mitra, *Libt.*, pp. 285 f.
9. *ibid.*, pp. 223-24.
10. *ibid.*, p. 245.
11. *ibid.*, p. 248.
12. *ibid.*, p. 249.
13. *ibid.*, p. 280.