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A Quest for God

Ramesh Chandra Tiwari
Bahraich, Uttar Pradesh, India

The Howrah Rajdhani was moving fast, whistling occasionally. In a compartment there sat a priest dressed in white. He was rather a heavy man in his early sixties, with dark-grey hair, shining eyes and a solemn face glowed with radiance. He was getting bored, waiting around with nothing to do, so he thought to pass the time by chatting with fellow travellers.

‘Where do you come from, brother?’ he asked a middle-aged man of medium height sitting opposite him.

‘I’m from Kolkata,’ replied the man, looking at the priest carefully. Then he added, as an afterthought, ‘Unless I’m much mistaken, you’re a temple priest of Varanasi.’

‘Of course.’

‘Excuse me, but I must say people don’t have a good opinion of priests.’

‘You know why?’ said the priest. ‘Radical politicians have been poisoning people’s minds against us. Besides, our society has for years been falling into decadence. The omens are not good for the country – people’s callous disregard for faith and moral education has desensitized them to all depraved and violent things. Most lawmakers have base motives. Doctors, businessmen, government employees, advocates and teachers, for instance, all have become money-grubbing.’

‘Priests are not money-grubbing?’ he shot back sarcastically.

‘Yes, a few hypocrites in the guise of a priest have distorted religious law and liturgy in their hunger for money.’

‘Anyway, religion is but a bundle of books, stuffed with mind-altering stories and dealing with superstitious beliefs. A religious teacher stuffs the minds of their followers with everything that rules their lives. Almost all religious teachers yearn to be famous in order that they may enjoy a life of luxury at the cost of their fans’ money.’

‘Oh well, you’re from Kolkata where a large number of people have socialist beliefs. I’m not surprised that you call religion a bundle of story books! By the way, you’ve ever read one?’

‘I don’t find it necessary to be hallucinated by it.’

‘Excuse me, Mr Atheist,’ said the priest with a sardonic smile, ‘but I think you’ve no right to pass judgement then. Just rise above prejudice and read anyone of them. I’ll bet you’ll find it to be the store of experience and knowledge which our culture has collected over a long period of time, which cover a broad range of disciplines like politics, humanities, social science, physics, maths, astronomy, chemistry, philosophy, ethics, philology, medical science and all, which shed light on almost all aspects of life along with the eternal and immutable laws of right and wrong

and which clear up the mystery of the universe and also of human nature. Since a succession of authors have been contributing to the construction and modification of our religion, it gives its adherents space to develop and to be civilized in due course of innovation rather than compelling them to follow closely the traditional beliefs and practices. There are certain....’

‘I’ve had enough of the grandiloquence!’ interrupted the atheist impatiently. ‘Does your religion not ask its followers to chant and to repeat the ritualistic acts of worship? Do these practices not make people religion addict? The youth lack sufficient information and fail to make sound judgement - do you, religious or political leaders, not take advantage of it? You know, they might otherwise be the greatest asset of the country.’

‘Well, who teaches them the set of rules and customs for controlled and polite behaviour: you agnostics? Strictly speaking, it’s you free-thinking liberals who, in hating religion, vilify our traditional etiquettes too. Consequently, children have no respect for their elders nowadays. If everyone takes to visit a place of worship twice a week and to recite a small part of a holy book every morning, I’m sure crime rates will fall considerably.’

‘Don’t try to sidetrack me! Isn’t it religion that has caused the sectarian divide and a deep rift between the castes? If it is not religion, what else is responsible for violence, population growth, illiteracy, and everything that has messed up social order?’

‘It’s the race for power, brother, not religion,’ countered the priest. ‘A politician arouses public hostility and the sins of politics are visited upon religion. Our religion is founded on love, kindness, forgiveness and wisdom – how can such things stem from it? As for the caste system, it is associated with the ancient system of dividing labour between the members of the society according to their skills and, as time went on, this practice became a tool for divide and rule.’

‘Religion was originally the ancient system of government consisting of customs and rules for managing crowd and therefore the mother of politics. I think it was due to being all belief in God that religion didn’t cease to exist even after it had been replaced by some new system and that ever since then, it has continued as a separate system within the systems of government that followed.’

‘Maybe you’re right, as religion is the first product of human civilization. But it would be unfair to take politics to be religion now.’

‘However, you can’t refuse to accept the differences that exist between different religious communities.’

‘Yes, social organization differs between the different groups of believers. Also, members of a group get used to their own culture which makes it difficult for them to adjust to different approaches. But then, it doesn’t cause them to become fanatical about religion until they are provoked by politics.’

‘Then why don’t you say that religion and politics are jointly liable to ethnic tensions?’

‘Why do you limit religion only to civics? After all it also includes spiritual values and worship of God whose pursuit gives a feeling of serenity and health. Some suffer from pain, some from

anxiety, some are after the money and thus problems continue to prey on the minds of all, only a devotee of God smiles in self-fulfilment.'

'Only a devotee of God smiles,' said the atheist, echoing his words mockingly. 'Lastly, you could not but reveal your hypocrisy. Ha ha ha!!!'

'You people are so negative about everything!' retorted the priest indignantly. 'Just fear divine retribution and learn to respect the environment. God created the world and surrounded us with beautiful things and people. All's well with the world, brother!'

'What does God mean – perhaps a piece of stone? Oh well, an imaginary flash of light is often referred to as divine, isn't it? What a load of superstitious nonsense!'

Next to the priest sat a strong lad of about twenty. 'Watch your tongue, you!' he bellowed at the atheist.

'So you'll shut my mouth!' snorted the atheist.

'I'll wrench your neck if you tried to disparage God like that!'

Another young man got up with a face like thunder. 'Wrench his neck if you are brave enough to!' he said threateningly. 'Well, that priest has been shooting his foul gob off about his religion – first, tell him to shut up.'

'To hell with religion,' blustered the first boy, standing up, 'it may be your property or his. But nobody's going to badmouth God!'

Both the priest and the atheist were fazed by the way the two lads started to argue. They could not but stare aghast at them.

'Mind your language, young man!' the second boy warned. 'Nobody would believe you value God above money?'

'You won't say anything stupid if you know what's good for...!'

'Oh, stop arguing you two - shake hands and make peace,' intervened a tall dignified gentleman who was sitting between the atheist and the second lad on the couchette. Then he stood up, grabbed the young men by their arms and sat them down. 'You know, patience goes together with wisdom,' he started up as he settled back on his seat himself. 'Each religion has its own set of beliefs, though the central tenets are usually common to all. There is also a godless society whose members put forward some very convincing arguments, too. Now, look, differing views are more of a boon than a bane to society. Suppose all the people in the world had similar views – wouldn't the world be a chocolate-box place? I have been listening to Mr Priest and Mr Atheist and I don't think I can fault any of them on their logic.'

'It's funny how one should agree with both of them, uncle,' said the first boy.

'There's nothing absolutely good because there is always a negative side to everything. So arguments can be presented both in favour and against religion. The reason our good sirs could

not take the argument to its logical conclusion despite that their line of reasoning carried conviction is that one is prejudiced against religion, and the other in favour of it.'

'But, uncle, I don't think the priest said anything sensible,' said the second boy.

'You're still young and innocent and, you know, a young boy is governed by emotions rather than reason and too short of information to make a sound judgement. Besides, there are certain factors that mould a person's life and affect their sense of right and wrong: for example, our families shape our lives and make us what we are; our belief-system influences our behaviour; our moral characters are formed by environment. But those who have risen above raw emotion, passions and prejudices are not guided by a particular set of ethical principles but by their conscience that tell us whether what we are doing is uniformly right or wrong. When you're my age, you'll find things differently. Well, here I'd like to ask you both if you have ever tried to see God.'

'No, uncle,' cried the boys.

'Then you must have a mental image of what He might be like and, according to your traditions, each of you may have a different idea about Him. All religions originated from a single source and God is one but is called by different names – that's all you need to know.'

'Could you please tell us a little about yourself, uncle?' asked the first boy.

'I'm an author,' was his reply.

'Oh, this is why you're so open-minded,' remarked the second boy.

Afraid of the first boy, the atheist had become twitchy about him, but as things had calmed down, he turned to the author to join in the conversation again. 'I mean no disrespect to you, sir,' he said, 'but I'd like to ask you whether you yourself have ever seen God.'

'Oh yes, I see what you mean,' laughed the author. 'Well, would you believe it, I've seen God! But, you know, I feel His presence all the time.'

'You feel His presence?' he echoed in surprise.

'Of course I do. Look, fish cannot see the sea and we cannot see the air until we see them from the outside, but they still feel the presence of water and we the presence of air. It's the same with being in God, except that, in this case, nothing can exist without Him with Him being eternal and infinite. God is there and we also feel his super management, only we do not get to realize His presence. The universe goes very systematically even though it is not controlled by any living thing. At puberty, we become mad to reproduce ourselves: there is certainly something about nature that always has the future world on its mind. The rains come; the sun shines; and the lands are alive with their flora and fauna: there is something divine worrying about the things we need for our survival.'

'Uncle, we're in God...?' said the first boy thoughtfully.

'Everything in this universe is part of Him so their elementary particles are eternal. Take, for example, water cycle in which water on the earth evaporates, rises in the sky, condenses, then

rains and finally it percolates down again and goes back to seas and lakes. Meanwhile, innumerable creatures and plants absorb water to keep them alive. This process has been ongoing for millions of years, but it could not reduce the amount of water by a single drop. Similarly, there's no limit to nothingness which is....'

'When everything in this universe, or the universe itself, is subject to an end, how can you tell if all are eternal?' broke in the second boy.

'What you call the end is the result of a transformation. Actually, all things are made up of one ultimate and everlasting thing called God, though they look different. Science is the study of that one thing in various forms. Now that scientists get deeply involved in their specific area of study, they often get blinded to the whole sphere of studies and question the existence of God.'

The author sounded convincing to all but the atheist. 'The thing that makes a house is the thing that makes a tree too?' he said, looking at the author questioningly.

'The things that make coal are the things that make diamond too; it is because of pressure and temperature that coal and diamond are two different things. Anyway, our perception is by definition imperfect, and therefore we cannot recognise anything unless there is a possibility of distinguishing one thing from another. Now, put two similar marbles, for example, one on each of your hands and see them carefully, but after you have mixed them up, you won't be able to recognize which one was on your right hand. Time and space are the basic backgrounds on which things and their activities stand out. Cats can see much better in semidarkness than we, but we can detect colours better. This proves that we don't see things as they are but we see them according to how the structure of our eyes can help us and our perception makes us, see them. The universe is not what it seems to be on the surface – for the basic form of anything cannot be other than a circle or a ball.'

'It is more astonishing that everything is basically circular in shape.'

'Yes, they are,' asserted the author. 'The lump of substance from which they have been moulded is made of atoms which are spherical in shape. The planets and stars are orbs. The earth and the moon orbit. Nothing functions unless there is a succession of periodically recurring events. The universe, for instance, originates from a point in the infinite nothingness, expands like the light and at some other point it also keeps dissolving in the same nothingness. These phenomena follow a cyclical pattern. The larger the thing, the longer the life cycle. The entire universe is made up of energy-charged particles that make images of different sorts like a computer. Zero-size particles form space because their plus-minus forces create void. They also generate physical particles when they do not find space to move, but at the same time they keep taking their previous form again. Now these facts tell us that nothing begins, nor ends – in other words, every point is both the start and end. Fundamentally, all particles are non-unique. It is the varied sets of them and the exchange of their energy in several different positions that make each group a different atom and thus duality emerges from oneness. Now with our minds being conditioned, we are unable to establish connection with non-unique particles. But as for the universe, its consciousness is absolute.'

'Oh, it's quite an eye-opener to me,' said the first boy. 'I used to believe that God lived in heaven and visited only a few of his chosen.'

‘But, uncle, if all is God, why should He treat us as individuals and expect us to do something?’ asked the second boy.

‘He doesn’t consider anything to be separate from him, but rather we do. He doesn’t even expect us to do anything – for He is the doer Himself. The strength and the logic which bring us success are not ours but conferred on us by God, who bears the same relationship to us as the sea bears to the drops of its water, which, though lifeless, are active within the sea. Now if one of the drops happens to say that she is free to move anywhere, would you believe? Nobody wants to grow old but every minute he gets older. God makes us row but steers himself and so nobody knows what will happen next?’

‘But why do all living things often suffer then?’ he persisted.

‘God wants to see us active so He has subjected us to certain feelings and intolerable experience of discomfort. Our needs and aspirations do not let us sit idle. Hatred, love, jealousy etc. provokes us into doing something. Fear of food shortage and crime plays a significant role in keeping us going. War or competition is a spur to even greater effort. This is how the world works.’

‘I agree to the idea, sir,’ intervened the atheist, ‘but why do religions present God as a separate being?’

‘Religion and realization are different things. Religion is a system of belief in God and the activities aimed at running a society ethically and morally. The originators of religions connected themselves and their teachings with God so that they could be considered as holy and the followers be made to adhere to the set of rules and beliefs established by them. However, like many other things that produce changes in the world, religions have also been the causative factors in human activities and also in wars that bring about huge change in the society. Hence everything that exists in this universe serves a purpose.’

‘I’m still just a bit confused, uncle,’ said the second boy. ‘There have always been stories of wars between God and Satan in mythologies. So if He were infinite, how could Satan come into existence?’

‘The universe consists of many different things, each having its adversary; and every two opposite things are roughly equal in volume. On the earth, day and night are of equal duration overall; there is as much fire as water; pleasure can’t exceed pain; each thing has its advantages and disadvantages. In mythologies, all positive forces are represented as God and negative forces as Satan so people think that God is benevolent, but in actual fact God is unparalleled and plays both the roles to make this universe work, as in absence of any of the forces, no activity is possible. Where there is vice there is virtue. How can religious teachers reform all of humanity when the novelty of everything after a time wears off and any attempt to construct an ideal society is foredoomed to failure?’

The train began to slow down and finally shuddered to a halt alongside the crowded platform. The air filled with noise and commotion with hawkers selling their wares and people pushing their way to get on and off the train.