

Module 5 : S. Radhakrishnan

Section 4 : Religion and Society

Societies during pre-modern times are generally built upon the religious precepts. Religions do propagate faith and in turn with the adoption of faith culture evolves. Keeping in mind this phenomenon, Radhakrishnan considers that society is the sedimentation of history. Every society will have its own structural replica of history of its particular experience. He says:

Society, being sedimented history as it has always a hangover of the past in it. With the passage of time, due to cultural interaction traditional themes assume a problematic character³⁴.

Radhakrishnan's interpretation of Indian culture in general and its philosophy in particular is not mechanical but a creative transformation of the same³⁵. We can observe from all of his writings his specific interest in interpreting and properly understanding the culture and the philosophy of a society. We can observe the same in his writings. They were most of the times the reinterpretations of the Hindu and Indian philosophical texts, in English in particular. It is instructive to note that Radhakrishnan is also opposed to the purely philosophical or intellectual ideals of humanism³⁶.

³⁴ **Centenary Volume, Radhakrishnan**, Ed. By G. Partha Sarathi, DP Chattopadhyay, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989. Page 41

³⁵ Ibid., Page 42

³⁶ Ibid., Page 42

He is also not in favor of the mere social, i.e., secular form, of humanism. He believes that the social form of humanism rests on a deeper spiritual truth. However, this spiritual truth must not be constructed other-worldly. It shall be very much this-worldly.

It is very much this –worldly, but it is not a mere expression or reaction to this or that form of social or political ideal. It has a larger import³⁷

Philosophy of Religion develops out of two fundamental ideas. They are the belief in the spiritual intuition or the individual's experience. This experience will not be shared by all. Yet they believe that they had an indirect experience through such examples. The second one is that such kinds of experiences of religion are considered generally in the modern times as illusions. This will not be the case with the people of the religion. They had a strong belief in the existence of Godhead irrespective of the personal differences they had in particular. These people will never doubt such experiences as illusions.

Radhakrishnan believes that, religion is capable of giving man a spiritual shelter. He also feels that it is capable of protecting him against the miseries of life. In short he writes:

Religion is social cement, a way in which men express their aspirations and find solace for their frustrations³⁸.

³⁷ Ibid., Page 43

³⁸ **History of Indian Philosophy**: Ed. Marietta Stepanyants, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, New Delhi, 1993. Page 202

Radhakrishnan's ideas on religion are due to his attitude towards the Indian Freedom Struggle. He is much influenced by his contemporary communal situation in India. He did not accept the right-wing reactionary forces of India. Instead of being communally emotional he preferred to be secular. He professed a religion which is rich with humane ideas, tolerant and which can fight for the enlightenment

in the place of religious implacability and communal strife. Instead of an orthodox Hindu religion he focused on the idea of a universal religion. And this religion is the religion of the spirit. This he feels as an alternative to the dogmatic creeds. Most probably his ideas were due to his very preoccupation to find a synthesis between the National Freedom Spirit and the infallible faith in the role of religion in human life. He sees well, the idea of good in every religion. He feels that every religion developed the same ideas like compassion, respect for truth etc. We shall have realized the true meaning of religion in every religion. We shall discover the common elements present in every religion. We shall be able to discard the hidebound self-centered narrow-minded religiosity. Then only a synthesis of all religions can be attained. Then only he says that the true essence of religion will be fully revealed. This only says Radhakrishnan can fulfill the very intentions of the religious mission in general³⁹.

Radhakrishnan claims that human nature is spiritual in origin. As he writes:

Human beings are original, unique and creative spirits who are not bound by necessities of the space-time world⁴⁰.

Radhakrishnan attaches great importance to the moral aspect of human life. His morality is founded on the thesis that faith and behavior go hand-in-hand. The precepts of morality shall then be universal and thus he envisages the universal moral code to found the universal religion. Lack of uniformity and unity within the societies of the world will impede generally such an effort. He strongly feels the necessity for such an ethical system that can be universal in effect. At the present he strongly feels that there are only temporary ethical systems, conditioned by the realities of class struggle. This is not to recognize the morality in class struggle.

³⁹ Ibid., Page 202

⁴⁰ Ibid., Page 204

In the view of Radhakrishnan Hinduism strove victoriously against the corruption of the ancient world, civilized backward people, transformed and purified the new elements and preserved tradition of the spiritual and the profane sciences.⁴¹ Further he believes that Religion is a search for truth and peace, not power and plenty.⁴² According to Radhakrishnan if we can rightly interpret the meaning of religion will be courage and adventure, not resignation and fatalism.⁴³ Radhakrishnan's thought will continue to think of the social problems also in the same line of the religion. Religion will generally try to take into consideration the conscience, the inner sense of man. We can have rational mind generally. But to have a rational conscience is a matter of moral order. Societies generally bring this into effect. Radhakrishnan sees the problems of our contemporary society and its political unrest as an inward crisis, as the loss of faith and as the weakening of our moral fiber. He says:

Events happen in mind of man before they are made manifest in the course of history. It is essential for us to get back to the old spirit which requires us to overcome the passions of greed and avarice, to free ourselves from the tyranny of a dark past, from the oppression by specters and ghosts, from the reign of falsehood and deceit⁴⁴

⁴¹ S Radhakrishnan., Page 476

⁴² Ibid., Page 477

⁴³ Ibid., Page 477

⁴⁴ ibid., Page 478

To achieve this we may need to revisit our ideals of our old spirit. It is journey with an effort to understand the true intentions of our culture and wisdom. Because of the bad situation of our society, Radhakrishnan observed a division in the man's soul. We assume that the intellectual and the moral exhaust the nature of man and that the world can be rebuilt on the basis of scientific or secular humanism. In this process we come across the basic question what shall be the seemingly indisputable facts on which the new world is to be built? It is not tenable to consider the human mind as the basis. He writes

Even the mind of man is a chance product evolved to help man to overcome in the struggle for existence. The world of nature is indifferent to man's dreams and desires⁴⁵

In his book ***Religion and Society*** Radhakrishnan tries to understand and find the relationship between the religion and the new world order. He comes across the political implications of an enlightened thing called democracy and its relation to that of society especially with respect to the religious society. After a long and exhaustive study he comes to the following conclusion:

If a political democracy is to become an economic democracy leading to the establishment of an ethical and spiritual democracy, we must recall men to faith that is at the vital source of vital democracy. We must educate men into the reality, the nature and the responsibility of human brotherhood. It is a new psychology that we have to develop. It is not a matter of theoretical learning. It is an education of the heart and the imagination, more than that of intellect. It is education into a new spirit of ethos. The revolutionary conceives the problem in too simple terms. The evils of the world are regarded as external to the individual self. If evil is incarnate, it is incarnate in other people, a class or race, a community or a nation. There is nothing to alter except machinery. But we must create the temper of mind to use the machinery. We must cultivate democracy as a state of mind, a style of life. A world brotherhood can be born only by the achievement of community within us. Here is the task for religion⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ Ibid., Page 479

⁴⁶ Ibid., Page 99-100

Radhakrishnan tries to provide a modified version of the birth order theory. He did not accept the caste system in toto. He tries to justify the principles of the Hindu caste system with that of moral preparation, and moral perfection. He strongly believes that through perfecting oneself one can come over his own birth order and can attain the best that is possible. It is the entire national freedom struggle that had influenced him much to love what is one's own self, the self of the Hindu dharma. Hinduism tried to purify itself to meet the necessities of the modernity and that of the West containing the Christian religion and the challenge of its Civilization.

Radhakrishnan finds here the feeling of nationality as the stronger component than the class. Thus, Radhakrishnan is in favor of a progressive ideology where his religion becomes the strongest vehicle which can keep man associated with the ideas of spirit which forms a true religion. For that he sees the need for a spiritual revivalism. He says religion is based on the discovery of the essential worth and dignity of the individual and his relation to a higher world of reality. If man wishes to be higher than the brute nature he cannot be satisfied with the worldly or material success. Even he cannot be satisfied with the materialistic sciences. He will come to know that he is capable of martyrdom for ideals shows that he lives in and for a world of eternal realities. The idea of eternity and the concept of reality mark the philosophy of Radhakrishnan with his outstanding orientation towards the perennial philosophy. But the concepts of perennial philosophy are from the west. We can simply see the strong influences of his contemporary western philosophical ideas on his mind.

He writes in his argument for the need of spiritual revival in his book ***Religion and Society***:

Worship is man's outreach to the divine. Religion is the discipline which touches the conscience and helps us to struggle with evil and sordidness, saves us from greed, lust and hatred, releases moral power, and imparts courage in the enterprise of saving the world. As a discipline of the mind, it contains the key and the essential means of coping with evil which threatens the existence of the civilized world. It implies the submitting of our thinking and conduct to the truths of the spirit.

Radhakrishnan is not in favor of the magic and dogmatic myth of the religion. He says that in its essence, religion is a call to spiritual adventure. In his view to restore the lost relationship between the individual and the eternal is the purpose of religion.

And he further says the essence of religion is not in the dogmas and creeds, in the rites and ceremonies which repel many of us, but in the deepest wisdom of the ages, ***sanatana dharma***, which is the only guide through the bewildering chaos of modern.