

THE NATURE OF RELIGION

A Compilation of Articles from The Mystic's Vision
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Religious Organizations

Periodically, in the course of history, an individual comes along who experiences the blessing of God whereby the divine nature of himself and of all reality is revealed to him in a mystical vision. But, very quickly thereafter, following upon the life of that individual, there arises a cadre of unilluminated individuals who, wishing to codify and institutionalize those revelations to suit their own inclinations and interpretations, set about founding a religious organization in accordance with their own understanding and their own purposes. It is the revelations of the authentic mystics whose vision is granted by God who are the carriers and disseminators of God's truth in order to inspire the rest of us and to instill that God-given knowledge into our hearts and minds. But it is the work of their counterparts, the religious zealots, to distort and misinterpret those mystical revelations to form the chains in which to bind and imprison the weak and gullible souls who are willing to follow their mistaken theoretical paths.

Religious organizations founded and promulgated, not by the seers of God, but by the clerks and officers of a dogmatic club of the unenlightened followers who regularly make up such organizations, inevitably corrupt and tarnish the teachings of the true mystics, the seers, who give their lives and hearts to bring enlightenment to the people. After the Upanishadic rishis, came the ritual-laden priests; after the Buddha, came the monks and their monasteries; after Jesus, came the unenlightened preachers and church organizers. After every worthy teacher of truth, came the blind popularizers and their distorted tenets. So, it has always been and probably shall always be. But, my friends, listen only to those who have truly *seen*, to those who are gifted by God to give expression to the true knowledge; and stubbornly

ignore those who pretend to represent those genuine seers but whose only true motive is to enslave you as a follower in the service of their pious, and lucrative, religious organizations.

Realistic Religion

Current popular religious ideologies tend to idolize or deify one or another historical religious figure whose spiritual wisdom is attributed to their unique divine origin and status. But as our understanding evolves, we are learning that each of us is of divine origin and that we too are able to access the fountain of spiritual wisdom within ourselves. Today, we understand that a number of people throughout history have experienced a revelation on the psycho-spiritual level that transcends the world of time and space, and essentially reveals that the identity of the individual consciousness and that of the all-embracing eternal Consciousness are one. This ‘mystical’ experience is still regarded as uncommon, and yet I estimate that it occurs to at least one person in every million, which amounts to around 7000 people in today’s world population of seven billion. Perhaps that is a generous estimate, but certainly a great number of people throughout the world have experienced at least momentary breakthroughs in consciousness that revealed a deeper, spiritual, level of reality underlying this apparently concrete world of material phenomena.

A more realistic approach to our religious understanding, therefore, would be to reject the deification and worship of a few historical religious figures, to see them rather as inspirational exemplars; and to embrace the ever-present possibility that we and all men and women might experience in ourselves an awareness of our own Divine Source in this very lifetime and know firsthand the certainty of our own divinity. The willingness to follow this path will not appeal to everyone, of course; but only to those few who are called to it. For we are not able to seek or bring about the experience of the soul’s ‘union with God’ of our own will; it is clearly the will of God Himself that sets us on the path and brings us to that ineffable experience.

Nor is it possible to know whom He will choose, but He seems to choose the very intelligent, the very compassionate, those selfless souls surrendered to His will; and He inevitably draws them within themselves through introspection and contemplation to His meeting place where those

souls are merged in His eternal awareness. But this ‘mystical’ path is not without obstacles; it is a path that demands much courage and sacrifice, for the mystic will undoubtedly face much opposition from a skeptical world. Nor should he expect any worldly rewards, for the only rewards obtainable in the mystic’s life are the seeds of hope, faith and joy that he is able to plant and blossom in the hearts of those whom his words touch. And his greatest happiness and satisfaction comes from his lifelong service in the praise of God to His glory and to the benefit of all His children.

Universal Spiritual Knowledge

As a young man, I became associated with a large spiritual organization, and was able to experience firsthand the exclusivity and group isolation that is a necessary offshoot of all religious or spiritual organizations centered on the adoration of any one spiritual teacher. However marvelously gifted or cloaked in legend such teachers or gurus may be, the exclusive adulation of any one teacher, whether living or dead, is much less worthy of emphasis than the demonstrable fact that all the many spiritual figures throughout history experienced an identical revelation of their divine identity.

Understandably, the ‘disciples’ of each charismatic spiritual teacher are drawn to and place their faith and devotion in the one they see and know, and to whose qualities they are most attracted. And yet, as I witnessed exemplified in the organization with which I was associated, the individual presence, personality, powers, and teachings of a particular ‘guru,’ along with his lineage, tend to become the sole center of the organization’s attention, and the work of the group becomes not the promulgation of universal spiritual knowledge, but the promotion of membership in that particular group, and the ritualized adoration and adulation of the celebrated teacher.

This pattern appears in every religious organization, and each such organization then stands, if not in opposition to all others, at least independent of and indifferent to all others. Each individual teacher, and his/her individual group of devotees is distinct from and exclusive to all other teachers and organizations. Each group comprises an independent corporate business enterprise whose purpose is to perpetuate itself. How could it be otherwise? Unless—if only we could imagine it—there was at heart a true interest in promoting the dissemination of a common universal

spiritual knowledge, regardless of trademarks, copyrights, and the self-interest of individual spiritual teachers or organizations.

It was in the interest of this common pan-historical spiritual knowledge that I wrote my *History of Mysticism*, which emphasizes the common non-sectarian mystical experience occurring throughout history to countless individuals regardless of religious or organizational ties. Its purpose was to draw attention, not to any one particular spiritual teacher, but to the many individuals of various lands and traditions living over an immense period of time who have experienced a common revelation of the divine nature of existence. It is they who make up the grand tapestry of spiritual knowledge that is the legacy and heritage of all, regardless of separate affiliations—a heritage that includes all teachers and all disciples in one universal and undeniable wealth of accumulated understanding, framed in a million ways and languages.

And yet, it is almost impossible for the partisan members of the various spiritual organizations to recognize those mystics and teachers outside the bounds of their own trademarked groups as brothers and sisters in a common vision, for it does not serve their separate self-interests or the long-term survival of their individual organizations to do so. The separate sectarian religious powers prefer not to acknowledge the universality of the mystical experience of ‘Self-realization’, ‘enlightenment,’ or ‘spiritual illumination;’ for they are heavily committed to and invested in the claim to their own long-established and unique religious traditions based on distinct historical persons and events. Thus, though Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are based on an identical experiential foundation, each of these religious traditions has continued for centuries to hold fast to its own unique historically based perspectives and foundations and its own ritualized religious observations, while ignoring the common experiential root of all—God’s interior revelation in the form of mystical experience.

A universal spirituality, informed by a broad knowledge of all religious traditions and their common mystical origin is not taught in the partisan churches, temples, mosques or synagogues; nor is it taught in our public schools or universities. Indeed, the people are so deeply steeped in the tradition of spiritual ignorance and exclusivity, it appears that there is little possibility that the tide can ever be turned. Certainly, the awakening from this profound slumber will not suddenly occur overnight. It will be a long, slow progression, as every cultural advance has been and must be. And it

will be a result of a worldwide effort at education that will require many voices. Will you do your part? Help spread the word! One thing you can do is to promote and disseminate free ebook copies of *History of Mysticism* in your country and abroad. You can also lend your own voice to a universal spiritual revolution, free of sectarian religious organizations. In this way, you can help to defeat the scourge of religious bigotry in this world. Thank you.

Freedom of Religion In The USA

The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States specifies that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ...” It is this document which guarantees freedom of religion to every citizen of this country. But there was a time in some countries of the world that this freedom was denied to its citizens. In the 7th century of the Current Era, the prophet Muhammed wrote in his Quran: “Kill those who join other deities to Allah, wherever you shall find them. But if they shall convert, ... then let them go their way.” ¹ And again: “Say to the infidel, if they desist from their unbelief, what is past is forgiven them. But if they return to it, ...fight then against them to the end, until the only religion left is Allah’s.” ²

It is this fear-inspiring scriptural doctrine that provided the means whereby Islam so rapidly expanded throughout the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent in the 7th to 13th centuries; and it is this same policy that is the foundation of the current *jihad* movement on the part of those radical members of Islam currently aligned against the entire rest of the world. This doctrine of ‘conversion or death’ must have seemed to Muhammed a reasonable prohibition of the ungovernable religious chaos prevalent in seventh century Arabia, but today it is regarded as still valid only by a few radical Islamic fundamentalists. For most educated Muslims, and in fact the great majority of Muslims, it is considered to be a remnant of an alien past and no longer a relevant portion of Islamic scripture.

Also, just as everyone easily understands that “jal”, “pani”, “agua” and “water” are merely different names for a substance that relieves thirst, and which remains the same substance regardless of the difference in the names used, they also easily understand that the universal Creator and Conscious Ground of existence and also is one, despite the many different names men

use to refer to Him. Therefore, it is recognized that all religions already belong to Allah. He may be called by any number of names: Allah, Hari, Yahveh, God, or Shiva—but all these names refer to the same Creator and Lord recognized as the universal Spirit dwelling within everyone. How, one wonders, would it even be possible for there to be more than one all-pervading and governing Spirit?

There are, indeed, many superficial differences among religious traditions: the various items of faith, the various rules and rituals, are distinctly different in each religious tradition, but so what? They arose in different times and places, in different cultures with different customs, and were written in different languages; so, it is only natural that they would contain apparent differences. Let them! If your faith and your rituals help you to become aware of the Divine within you, adhere to them, and let others adhere to their own. If Allah wishes to reform anyone's faith, He is well able to do so without your assistance or anyone else's assistance. We are innately free to choose our own scriptures, our own ideas, and our own ways of worshiping; and so, it is incumbent upon us to leave others to choose their own ways as well. God has given each man and woman the ability to see things from their own individual and regional perspective and by the light of their own intellect.

In the United States, Freedom of Religion is mandated by law, and here it is a guaranteed right that is taken for granted by many. Yet we should all be reminded that this written mandate is derived from a precious unwritten law that takes precedence over any and all sectarian religious laws: it is the divine law of human freedom—and it is universal and absolute. Freedom of religion, freedom of thought in general, is a basic right on the part of all peoples and is recognized as such by every world faith. It is this God-given freedom which guarantees the peaceful coexistence of people of differing backgrounds and beliefs and assures their freedom from coercion. In today's world, there is no place for an enforced religion, and those sectarian partisans insisting that the rest of us adopt *their* scriptural creed and its laws must be loudly, explicitly, and universally refuted and condemned throughout all the world.

Let the intelligent people of the world rise up with one voice and declare their unity in opposition to this fanatical policy! Let the various religious bodies and all the world's governments fearlessly declare the priority of universal religious freedom and insist on its adoption throughout the world!

Gather up your courage, all you ministers and rulers, all you thinkers and writers, all you godly and wise people of the earth! Speak out the truth that *all* religious scriptures—even those claimed to be divinely inspired—were written by fallible human beings. Divinely inspired as these men may have been, all ‘scriptures’ are merely products of the minds of men rooted in time and circumstance and bear no divine universal mandate for all. Each of us is given a mind capable of thought and judgment and self-rule; each of us is a manifestation of the Divine, possessing the God-given freedom of independent choice. Honor that gift—and give voice to it. In this current period of time, it is crucial to establish this truth on earth for all to share, along with the mandate of ‘Do no harm’. May Allah bless everyone with the possession of this wisdom.

Those who are on a spiritual quest must realize that this quest is *not* the pursuit of a worldly victory for a particular sectarian ideology; it is not a pursuit that is advanced by physical conquest at all. The spiritual quest is an *inner* pursuit of the direct revelation of God as one’s own divine Self. And if we are to directly experience God, or Allah, within ourselves, we must be able to explore all ideas without limits or exclusions; we must be able to court the Divine in our own hearts by every means and by whatever name we choose. When we do come to know Him, we will realize that He can never be limited to any single name, concept, or form.

The inner revelation of the all-pervading Spirit is the same for all and reveals a common truth; and yet that revelation too often becomes colored by the interpretation put forward by the particular religious tradition of the society into which one is born, or to which one is karmically attracted. All religious traditions are born of someone’s spiritual experience, and while each tradition contains and preserves some kernel of the truth of that universal experience, the different cultural and historical contexts surrounding each tradition oftentimes serve only to limit our spiritual perspective and understanding. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and all the rest, are mere ideational precepts, mere politics; and they divide us and disconnect us from the true conscious awareness of our own universally divine reality. Indeed, we as a people have succeeded over the centuries only in obfuscating and concealing the simple truth of our universally divine existence by the many dissevered and dissonant perspectives that we mistakenly call by the name of religion.

Isn't it amazing how the majority of the world's populace continues to hold fast to its childish sectarian mythologies while often remaining completely unaware of the very existence of true spiritual realization! It is as though the general tradition-bound public and those pursuing true spiritual realization exist in distinctly separate dimensions with no means of communicating with each other. It is not only diverse languages and regional cultures that divide us, nor merely the multiplication of disparate voices throughout history that has caused a proliferation of allegiances of faith; we seem to be lost in our own inherently impenetrable and directionless fog, our own innate blindness of ignorance. And we must wonder: 'Will the world's scattered flocks ever return to a single common pasture? Or will each separate collection of partisans remain forever isolated from one another, perpetuating dissent and confusion and conflict in full view of the reality of an undivided Unity?'

Let us not bicker about the differences in religious traditions in a misguided attempt to find which of them is true. None of the various religious traditions contains truth in themselves; and yet each of them possesses the ability to lead one to the *experience* of truth. It is the inner *experience* of the Divine Self that is the prize to be sought; religious institutions merely provide pathways to that inner experience wherein lies all certainty and satisfaction. The purpose of all religious traditions is to focus the mind on God, who lives within the heart of every soul. When that Divine Spirit draws the soul to the realization of its oneness with Himself, then and only then is the truth found.

If your religious tradition is truly worthy of your allegiance, it will lead you from the exterior to the interior, from the outer environment to the inner environment, and from thought construction to the still clarity of vision. Become quiet, and search for your Divine Lord, not within the pages of a book, but within yourself. If He reveals Himself, you will know Him as your own Self as well. Then your religious path will have fulfilled its purpose, and you will have no further need of a religious path. For here is the secret truth:

Though you play the game
Of searching for God's presence,
And though at times it seems that you are
Lost in this persuasive dream of time,
The truth is that you are the One
Who is imagining this broad fantasy.

All this is You: You are the seeker,
 The search, and that which is sought.
 You are truly the divine Self in all.
 You have only temporarily forgotten
 That you reign supreme as the eternal One,
 Forever unbounded by time or place.

NOTES:

1. Quran, IX:5, 6.
2. Quran, VIII:39, 40. Also II:191-193.

For Those Who've Been A Long Time Sleeping

It turns out that the earth is not flat, but round, my dear.
 And it circles the Sun—not the other way around.
 It is also clear that it's not necessary to be born of a virgin,
 Or miraculously conceived
 In order to know that you're born of God's light,
 That you live within Him and consist of His being,
 That all this universe is made of Him.

God has revealed Himself in me as well.
 Do you think that I'm special? I'm sorry; you're wrong.
 Yet even a poor fool like me is able to realize God by His grace,
 And know oneness with Him.
 But how could that be—unless He lived within me,
 And lived within every other being as well?

Do you really want to hold onto the old stories,
 Even though it's clear that they're untrue?
 Know that each of us is made of His light.
 Know that you too can experience your divinity within,
 And know the truth of your oneness with Him.

Cast off superstition, the habits of the past!
 So many have known Him; this can't be denied.
 Wake up to the truth: we are each one of us
 Sons of the almighty God.
 Pray to Him who lives in your heart

That He will reveal your oneness with Him,
And enable you to reflect His light to the world.

Self-Reliance

For spiritual aspirants, there is a great deal to be said for living in a focused spiritual environment such as a monastery, ashram, or temple; but oftentimes a life so lived is at the cost of one's intellectual and moral freedom, and this is detrimental. To limit oneself to a specific tradition, with determined hierarchies and specific unquestionable narratives, is always detrimental to the freedom of thought. And if that tradition demands an unswerving devotion, not to the divinity within you, but to the words and divine authority of some book or historical person, so much more is the limitation and the detriment.

Of course, living unprotected in the world is dangerous also. There are many temptations to avoid, and the peace required for meditation and contemplation is hard to find. Also, the absence of the companionship of like-minded souls makes for a lonely existence. But it seems to me, that despite the loneliness and the hardship, an earnest soul, with the help of God, has the strength, courage and inner resources to forge a spiritual life in the world. She finds companionship in the presence of God and knows the added advantage of living free of confining restrictions to her intellectual and moral freedom.

I am a great believer in freedom, and therefore recommend to all spiritual aspirants the path of independence, non-affiliation, and self-rule, which allows freedom to evolve. Even if conforming to the herd appeals to your desire for belonging to a community or for the possible attainment of some measure of authority; resist it; be your own master—even if it means you must deal with some loneliness and struggle. The greatest attainment is freedom—the freedom to give your heart entirely to God within you, and to think and act in accord with the dictates of your own divine Self. At the end of a long and productive life, nothing will savor so sweetly to you as the satisfaction of being and having been wholly true to your Self.