

Narayana Guru's Concept of One Religion (EkaMatam) - A Panacea For Religious Rivalries

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Abstract

Happiness is the common goal of mankind, and unitive understanding is the solvent of all paradoxes and problems. In modern life, religious and ideological rivalries assert themselves in various false garbs. Many are the new fangled names given by interested groups to label as a patent for private monopoly. Narayana Guru's contemplation or unitive understanding tries to bring out a new attitude establishing order where chaos has reigned. The aim of all religions is to attain Self-happiness. Happiness as the aim of man gives unity to human purpose and brings all religions under its single sway. Once this core-secret of all religions become known to the religionists, all rivalries and feuds among them disappear. The urgent need of today is the reawakening of the believers of all religions to the heart of their own religious teachings. Religion then may become something that enhances human dignity based on a scientificity of its own.

Key words: *Self-happiness, Atma-sukham, Contemplation, Panacea, Rivalries.*

1. Introduction

Narayana Guru avowedly is an advaitin (non-dualist). His non-dualism is such that all the multiple 'isms', mysticisms, ethics, religions and science merge in the Unitive vision of Reality. Guru's enlightenment that everything is but One Consciousness or Atma became manifested as it could not tolerate any discrimination among human beings based on caste, religion, God, ideology, language or any other consideration. Hence the Guru's vision was all comprehensive, Unitive and Universal. The topic dealt with here is Narayana Guru's Concept of One Religion (EkaMatam)--A

Panacea for Religious Rivalries. The One Religion of mankind to which the Guru referred in his great maxim of "Man is of One Caste, One Religion and One God for all mankind"¹ is to be visualized from two distinct stand points. One is the method of taking into account the common end of happiness that all religions have as the central value implied in their teachings. The second method is of a contemplative nature in which the set of beliefs, world views and mythologies etc are brushed aside for the sake of a higher value aimed at by every religion. The Guru observes these two methods in his philosophy finding a Unitive ground. This article tries to elucidate the unique methodology rendered by the Guru and scientific validity of the teaching of Narayana Guru by examining how the Guru looked at religious differences, exploring possibilities of impacting discourses on religion, in order to animate religious feuds and ensures enduring peace in life. It also deals with the impact of Guru's view of religion on modern society, its relevance and future scope.

2. Religion : A Way Not An End In Itself

Human beings have many needs to fulfill; such as food, shelter, self – expression and recreation. There is, however, the need for understanding what is real, and consequent upon that need, to establish ways for fulfillment. All the troubles of religion, the rivalries and conflicts, stem from the ways to reach what is real. The real can be

¹ Muni Narayana Prasad Guru, *Narayana Guru Complete Works*, D.K. Printworld, 331, (2006).

only one, the ways can be, and are many, or we can say the ways are relative and the real is absolute.

3. The Role of Religion

Narayana Guru uses the terms Ātma, Arivu, Consciousness, Karu and God to denote the one Reality. This one Reality alone is what religions refer to as God. It is when man feels the unavailability of living consciously relating himself with this Reality, or the necessity of finding himself one with the whole, that religions find place in human life. The ultimate goal of all religions is ensuring happiness in human life by helping man find himself one with the whole in actual life.

4. Religion : Meaning

Etymologically, religion means 'to bind back'. The word religion is derived from the Latin words 're' and 'legare' or 'ligare'. The corresponding Sanskrit word for religion is *dharma* which means 'to hold' or 'to support'. *Matam* is the original word Narayana Guru used for religion. This word means also 'opinion', 'idea', 'belief' or 'view'. In the Bhagavad Gita also, the word 'matam' is used as 'confirmed opinion'.

Religions are a great driving force in imparting guidance and inspiration to human beings in general. Religion consoles many aching hearts. It encourages people to organize themselves into becoming productive corporations. It promotes art and culture. The philosophy of all religions offers a clear and stable foundation for the harmonious existence of men, nation and civilization. The founders and prophets of all religions were all lovers of humanity and truth. They wanted freedom with bread for all. They were enlightened persons who have the intuitive experience of God. What they have seen and experienced is beyond words and certainly beyond the comprehension of a relativist vision. When these great masters disseminated the truths, their wisdom was misunderstood because the minds of the recipients were not so enlightened as those of their masters. For the purpose of social security and political advantage followers of all religions got themselves organized. As a result of this, feuds and conflicts arose among the followers of all masters. What is needed is a spiritual regeneration of religion. It is the task of religion to enkindle in the minds of modern men, intuitive perception of his true nature and potentialities. It is here the study of Narayana Guru gains importance as he held that religions in essence are ensuring every man to attain Self – happiness. Human interests whether collective or individual, have their common centre in the Self.

5. Narayana Guru's Concept of Religion

The Guru's concept of religion is given in his *Ātmopadesa Satakam* (One Hundred verses of Self-Instruction), verses 44-49¹, which is known as Guru's critique of religion.

Verse 44 reads.

The many faiths have but one essence;
Not seeing this, in this world, like the
blind men and the elephant,
Many kinds of reasoning are used by
the unenlightened who become
distressed;
Having seen this, without being
disturbed, remain steadfast.

Guru declared in this verse that the content of all religions is essentially one and the same. Those who argue for or against any particular religion are compared to the well-known story of a few blind men seeing an elephant. Guru says, one religion becomes respectable and another despicable only because of the partial understanding that people have about religion.

Guru's kindly concern for universal welfare has been aptly expressed in verse 45.

One faith is despicable to another;
The *karu* described in one is defective
in another's estimation;
In the world the secret of this is one
alone;
Know that confusion prevails until it is
known to be thus.

Controversy arises between doctrines of religion in defining the highest truth each wants to uphold. The Guru uses the term '*karu*' in a most comprehensive sense, which can cover several aspects of the absolute such as the transcendent, the primeval cause, the substance that evolves into all moulds and the overall norm of all evaluations.

Verse 46 reads.

To vanquish (a religion) by fighting is not
possible; no religion
Can be abolished by mutual attack; the
opponent of another faith
Not remembering this and persisting in his
fight,
His own doom shall he in vain fight for,
beware!

¹ Nityachaitanyayati Guru, *Neither This Nor That But Aum*, Vikas Publishing House, 90-101, (1982).

In this verse the Guru says it is not possible to defeat any religion through fighting for every religion has, for its strength, at its core, the high value factor that makes of it a religion. So, fighting over religion results not in the destruction of the targeted religion, but only of the person who fight.

Verse 47 reads,

To become of one faith is what everyone speaks of;

This the proselytizers do not, recognize;

Wise men, freed of objects to another's faith,

Know this secret in full

In this verse 47 appreciating and imbibing the essentials of another religion we will only discover the greater and hidden truth of our own religion; hence it is foolish to promote exclusiveness in religious attitudes.

A Christian hopes the world one day will follow Christianity; a Muslim expects to convert the entire world to Islam; a Buddhist feels happy if the entire human race embrace Buddhism; a Hindu, though religious conversion does not form part of the creed of Hinduism, always would be happy if the entire world adopts its way of life. But none of them realizes the fact that all these mutually exclusive hopes will never be materialized, for the zeal of every religionist is equally strong and equally meaningful.

The Guru's well-known dictum, is "whichever the matam, it suffices if it betters man".

During the Conference of World Religions conveyed by Narayana Guru, he gave the delegates the following watch word: "We are here to know and to let know, not to argue and win." A person wanting to know envisages the value of another man's vision. His preparedness to listen paves the way for acceptance and consequently unity arises. When a person wants to share his knowledge or spiritual experience he already desires the well-being of another. The essence of all religions is equally precious to those who have no hang-ups such as "my religion" and "your religion".

Narayana Guru has written a universal prayer entitled 'DaivaDasakam'. God is here recognized as one God, not as the God of any place or religion. This prayer begins with the word 'daivame' which means, 'Oh God' and ends with the word 'sukham' which means happiness.

Transmitting one's identify with closed religions into an open one with God or the absolute is the best solution to the prevailing problems of religious rivalries. But only a few wise people realize this truth. Most of the believers remain ignorant of this. Instead of making life blissful through religiousness, they find blissfulness in sacrificing the

very life meant to be made blissful. Instead of identifying oneself to a particular religion, identifying oneself with the goal of all religions, resulting in the living experience of non-dual blissfulness. All these points are suggested in verse 48.

Verse 48.

The self encased in a body, in his eidetic consciousness,

Understands all such as, "That is mine" and "This is mine"

Bereft of body identify ; on considering this

It is evident that everyone has truly experienced.

6. The One Religion of The Guru

The Guru defines religion in verse 49.

All beings are making effort in every way,

All the time, for the happiness of the Self;

In the world, this is the one faith;

Pondering on this, without becoming subjected to sin, be controlled.

In this verse Guru defines religion as "the quest for Self-happiness (*AtmaSukham*). The greatest common factor in all conscious and unconscious behavioural motivation is the search for happiness. Yogis seek *kaivalyam*, Jnanis seek self-realization, Buddhists seek *nirvana*, the Christian goal is salvation; these are all different names for the *sumumbonum* of everybody's search. Many people do not adhere to any religion yet they too have formulated their own philosophy and scheme to achieve supreme happiness in life. Narayana Guru uses the compound word Self – happiness (*AtmaSukham*). The Self or Atma is the pure and unconditioned consciousness manifested in all human beings, which is *sat*, *cit* and *ananda*. Ananda as understood by the Guru and Vedanta in general is not mere happiness, it is, rather the norm that enables us to measure and discern each event as pleasurable or painful, and makes one capable of treating both pleasure and pain with a sense of equanimity as a natural part of life.

This search for happiness is one and same in all, at all times, in all the ways and everywhere, irrespective of the differences in caste, religion, God, ideology, language, nation etc. This oneness is the one religion (*ekamatam*) of Narayana Guru.

Many definitions of religion are given by eminent thinkers, in The Encyclopedia of

Philosophy. The Encyclopedia of Religion, The New Encyclopedia Britanica, but none of them gives us a unique essence; it does seem that they contribute our understanding of the nature of religion.

In the Encyclopedia of Philosophy it is said that an adequate definition of religion should throw light on the sorts of disputes and perplexities that typically produce a need to define religion such as disputes over whether communism is a religion, and whether devotion to science can be called a man's religion¹.

In this sense Narayana Guru was the 1st person who has given an adequate definition of religion; Guru's words have in them the dynamics of his realization.

7. The Unique Method

Religion itself has to be unitively or contemplatively understood. There is a vertical or unitive and a horizontal approach to problems. The horizontal when stressed, divides and differentiates, while the same problem approached vertically or unitively finds a solution to conflicts and spells reconciliation. The prime objective of contemplation is to solve and reconcile duality in every phase and thus eliminate conflict at every step we take in life, throughout the entire human activities or interests.

Unitive understanding enables us to appreciate that the essence of all religions is the same.

This unitive approach is known to the West as dialectical wisdom. In India, this has been known as the Advaita approach which is non-dual in character.

The Guru not only taught this wisdom, but lived as an embodiment of that wisdom also. This wisdom has to find expression in day to day activities of the person concerned also.

Narayana Guru established an Ideal Society at Aruvippuram in Thiruvananthapuram District, Kerala in 1888. There the Guru installed a Sivalinga for the worship of all. In winding up the proceedings of this memorable day, the Guru proclaimed the following words to the crowd.

Devoid of dividing walls
Of caste or race
Or hatred of rival faith,
We all live here

¹ Edwards Paul (Ed), *The Encyclopedia Of Philosophy*, Vol 7, Macmillan Publishing, 142 (1967).

In Brotherhood,
Such, know this place to be!
This Model Foundation!

8. All Religions' Conference

Narayana Guru organized an "All Religions' conference" in Alwaye in 1924. This was the first of its kind in India, second in the world. The Guru's dream of the people of all races and religions coming together to share the light of love and spiritual insight had thus become a reality. It turned out to be a great seed of Unitive Vision shown in the right soil, at the right time. In that conference the Guru declared that all should study all religions and he also announced that he had decided to establish a 'Mata MahaPadasala' at Sivagiri to teach and study all religions.

9. Conclusion

A careful scrutiny of Narayana Guru's religion will reveal the neutral normative nature of the position he maintains in his attitude which is intended to be fully universal and scientific, neither taking the side of the believers nor the sceptic, the orthodox or heterodox of any traditional context of any time or any part of the world. It is here the Guru's religion excels in being unitive and scientific.

Happiness is the golden thread of human values which gives unity and meaning to the whole of life. It brings all religions or creeds under its single sway.

The Guru not only presents here the happy prospect of One Religion for all mankind, more than that asks each man to adopt this attitude so that he could find peace of mind for himself and attain the goal of happiness.

In Guru's vision of the future of the lot of the humanity, the solution for conflicts between religions as ideologies that are closed and static can come only when the open dynamic and unitive, contemplative or universal way becomes evident to the mind of the generality of men. Hence the contemplative way of solving the human problems must be cultivated more and more.

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