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THE RELIGIOUS MOTIF IN THE POETRY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

BY

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Religion in Tagore's Poetry

Tagore's primary impression upon the English speaking world was made by his abilities as a poet.¹⁾ The Nobel prize of 1913 was given in recognition of his poetic contribution. Writing in the *Vishva-Bharati Quarterly*, he described himself in 1923 as a singer. Listen as he sings in his lyrics "When the streams of ideals that flow from the East and from the West mingle their murmur in some profound harmony of meaning it delights my soul."²⁾ Tagore's poetry gives us a glimpse into his religious songs of meaning. Religion is the inner experience of man expressed by outward social concerns. It is free of territorial bounds, is dynamic and communicative. Poetry expresses the religion of man in the forms of the artist.

Negative Criticism of Sectarians

Let us catch a glimpse of Tagore's negative appraisal of those whom he calls the sectarians. Their expressions of religion are rejected because they are limited, localized restrictions which cut man off from the free flow of meaningful cultural existence. A general indictment against all narrow minded religious people is given succinctly in one of his "fireflies," those "specks of living light twinkling in the dark."³⁾ One of his three line poems powerfully describes the narrow temperament, which isolates itself from other men, yet claims the whole measure of truth.⁴⁾

1) A poet like Tagore is what Indians have traditionally called a wise man, one who possesses spiritual insight into the complex mysteries of life.

2) R. Tagore, "The Indo-Iranians," *Vishva Bharati Quarterly* (October, 1923, 205.

3) Tagore, *Fireflies* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), 8.

4) *Ibid.*, 209.

The sectarian thinks
that he has the sea
ladled into his private pond.

Tagore likes to compare the sectarian to the world of nature. He sees in the narrow man and the dewdrop reflections of the same incongruous claim. On the one hand there is a claim of absolute certainty, while on the other hand such assurance has been asserted from a very confining base of exposure. His poetic firefly flits ⁵⁾

The dewdrop knows the sun
only within its own tiny orb.

The sectarian is one who condemns others' reasons from a constricted world view and reaches conclusions ostensibly applicable to all men.

The religious man of action is scrutinized by Tagore, for he too stifles ultimate concern. Song and dance, offering and temple should become concerns in which men are grasped with ultimate meaning. The sects had recorded the notes, but had lost their meaning. Tagore writes, ⁶⁾

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!
Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark
corner of a temple with doors all shut?
... Come out of thy meditations and leave
aside thy flowers and incense!

Who is it that men worship in darkened corners, by means of beads, incense and flowers? "Who" is the proper question, for both the object of worship and the worshipper himself are persons. The sectarians have depersonalized religion; their worship is directed to material objects.

Those who have rejected the world and live a life of renunciation also feel the poetic rebuke of Tagore. The daily life of sensual involvement is not to be negated in favor of retreat from the temptations of the senses. On the contrary, Tagore sings, ⁷⁾

Deliverance is not for me in renunciation.
I feel the embrace of freedom
in a thousand bonds of delight.

It is through the senses of sight, sound and touch that the desires of joy and love are set free. The mass of poor men, those lowly in status

5) *Ibid.*, 124.

6) Tagore, *Gitanjali* (New York. Macmillan, 1916), 31.

7) *Ibid.*, 89.

and those who search and travel on pilgrimage whisper the sounds of religious concern in Tagore's poetry.

Positive Religious Expression

The rejection of the sectarian's excesses is not the only subject of Tagore's poetry, for it functions as a black background for Tagore's livelier colors expressing positive religious experience and manifestation. Reason is not to be totally rejected. He addresses the ultimate as "That truth which has kindled the light of reason in my mind.⁸⁾ Nor are all actions to be discarded, for he sings, "It shall be my endeavor to reveal thee in my actions."⁹⁾ Neither meditation nor silence are excluded as having part in religion. Tagore's criticism of those who cut off all relations with the world falls short of total rejection of their mode of operations.

But Tagore wanted to repersonalize their endeavor. Their approach had become too abstract; he sought to channel their energies toward a personalized goal. Quietude and meditation are set into a theistic context and within that relationship find meaning for Tagore. "Now it is time to sit quiet, face to face with thee, and to sing dedication of life in this silent and overflowing leisure," Tagore says to his personal ultimate.¹⁰⁾

In a poem written in 1932 over which Tagore painted a temple set in a background of a breaking dawn, he wrote, "The night has ended. Put out the light of the lamp of thine own narrow corner smudged with smoke. The great morning which is for all appears in the East. Let its light reveal us to each other who walk on in the same path of pilgrimage."¹¹⁾ This poem written late in his life (he was seventy-three years old) contains several elements of Tagore's positive religious aspirations and expressions. The basic element of religion is man, man not as some unchanging artifact of history, but as a living being in the process of becoming something else, something more satisfying. Man is searching for meaning. He has clues to meanings all about him. Taking those clues, he realizes that there are depths of satisfaction

8) *Ibid.*, 26.

9) *Ibid.*

10) *Ibid.*, 27.

11) Tagore, *Drawings and Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1961), plate 23.

beyond his present limitations, and so he sets out on a pilgrimage with others to learn. This pilgrimage leads him to realms beyond the senses, and to a unifying experience with the ultimate, which is conceived as personal. Religious experience cannot be bottled up, capped and kept within an individual however, and Tagore gives us only glimpses of the spiritual life which after its union, results in social service and humanitarian concerns.

Man

To Tagore, religion is as complex as the full range of human beings one knows in his cultural milieu. Man is neither totally good, nor absolutely bad, but is a complex of commingling assets and debits. The man Tagore sketches in his poetry is neither an unattainable ideal, nor an illusory play of the creator. In a letter, written about 1890, Tagore wrote, "The stream of all my creations and my feelings have found their end in man."¹²) Man is the focal point of Tagore's poetry. He again expressed this centrality of man in his world view as well as his literary production in one of his last poems when he said,¹³)

Now has come Man Supreme
Man after God's own heart!

Tagore's poetry sings of a man who experiences separation and loneliness. Sensitive to the shifting tides of life, Tagore's man feels himself separated from a greater reality and lonely in his isolation. Tagore writes, "When the weariness of the road is upon me, and the thirst of the sultry day . . . then I cry not for your voice only, my friend, but for your touch . . . There is an anguish in my heart for the burden of its riches not given to you. Put out your hand through the night . . . let me feel its touch along the lengthening stretch of my loneliness."¹⁴) The same theme of unfulfilled thirst of being is found in poem one of the *Fugitive and Other Poems*. "Darkly you sweep on, Eternal Fugitive . . . Is your heart lost to the lover calling you across his immeasurable loneliness?"¹⁵)

¹²) Tagore, *Wings of Death*, Aurobindo Bose, Trans. (London: Murray, 1960), 88. R. Tagore, *Thought Relics* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 21. "We are not mere facts in this world like pieces of stone, we are persons."

¹³) Tagore, *Wings of . . .*, 88.

¹⁴) Tagore, Fruit Gathering, quoted in *Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Macmillan, 1937), 164-65.

¹⁵) Tagore, *The Fugitive and Other Poems*, quoted in *Collected Poems . . .*, 327.

The Quest

Man, lonely and sensing his separation from other things, other men and even at his deepest level from himself sets out to search for meanings yet unrealized. 16)

Man seems deeply to be aware of a separation at the root of his being, he cries to be led across it to a union, and somehow he knows that it is love which can lead him to a love which is final.

Even before man takes up his pilgrimage, he has learned several things. The search for meaning is not confined to the intellect, but it is one which will engage the whole of his being. He also knows that the search will take the form of a human quest—a person to person dialogue. The artistic talents and propensities as well as the experiences of human love will be employed in the search. Prior to man's departure on pilgrimage, he has uttered his first prayer, "Lead me from the unreal to Truth." 17)

The personal goal is the fulfillment of Tagore's quest. The real is addressed with a personal pronoun—"thou" so that the quest is a personal dialogue of man and the personal ultimate. Remembering earlier autobiographical days, Tagore recalls in a poetic interchange "... entering my heart unbidden ... thou didst press the signet of eternity upon many a fleeting moment of my life." 18) Such an idea is important for Tagore. Life is not a static, unchanging repetition of predetermined molds, but is a progressing growth and continual process. One's life is lived beyond himself and he progresses along the path of life interacting with other men and the ultimate. Such a life is understood and experienced in a personal way.

Union for Tagore is expressed as the temporal coincidence of subject and object. Man and the personal ultimate meet but never dissolve into abstract oneness. The poet employs the analogy of human love. Love is the reciprocal and binary expression between two human beings. Tagore is a poet of love. He speaks of the Ultimate as the "master poet," and in the words of love he sings, 19) "My song has put off her ornaments. She has no pride of dress and decoration. Ornaments

16) Tagore, *Thought Relics*, in *A Tagore Reader*, A. Chakravarty, Ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 20.

17) *Ibid.*, 25.

18) Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 55-56.

19) *Ibid.*, 28.

would mar out union; they would come between thee and me; their jingling would drown the whispers.”

The lover and the loved want nothing to disturb their communication and union. It is neither their dress nor decoration that attracts them and fulfills their desires, it is but one another. Tagore says of the union, ²⁰⁾

... for this thy love loses itself in the love of thy lover, and there art thou seen in the perfect union of two.

Union, which seems to be so elusive for the scholar to express verbally in reasoned propositional form is in the hands of the poet beautifully described in a dialogue between the sun and the dewdrop. ²¹⁾

“I dream of thee, but to serve thee I can never hope,” the dewdrop wept and said; “I am too small to take thee unto me great Lord, and my life is all tears.”

“I illumine the limitless sky, yet I can yield myself up to a tiny drop of dew,” Thus the sun said, “I shall become but a sparkle of light and fill you, and your little life will be a laughing art.”

The union of the worshipper with the worshipped is discussed primarily in Tagore’s poetry by means of the love-devotion motif. But there is also an aspect of the experience which is beyond the ability of words to capture. The union is real, but language cannot adequately describe, nor can symbolize it sufficiently. Although verbal communication ceases, intuition experiences. This is the non-verbal manifestation of the religion of Tagore. His poetry throbs with these suggestive ideas. The poet vainly tries to experience the personal ultimate, but finds out that words fail, music and song are inadequate and he remains silently baffled.

Often Tagore’s poetry reaches its best in his *Fireflies*. In a whispered dialogue between the shore and the sea, the shore begs “Write to me what thy waves struggle to say. The sea writes in foam again and again and wipes off the lines in a boisterous despair.” ²²⁾ Theories, propositions, words and utterances are futile attempts to convey the meaning of man’s religious ultimate experience.

If words fail to convey the meaning of the union, what then does

²⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, 73.

²¹⁾ Tagore, *Fruit Gathering*, 166.

²²⁾ Tagore, *Fireflies*, 216.

the religious writer do to communicate? He writes about silence in paradoxes of words and nonverbal spaces. The worshipper's gratitude reaches a sphere in which he cries, "Let not my thanks to thee rob my silence of it higher homage." ²³⁾ Attempting to set this expression of silence in a context, Tagore speaks through the lips of the loving devotee, "Now it is time to sit quiet, face to face with thee, and to sing dedication of life in this silent and overflowing leisure." ²⁴⁾

The silence is not only on man's side of the union, but the personal ultimate also remains silent. This does not dishearten or disturb the man, for he sings, "If thou speakest not I will fill my heart with thy silence and endure it." ²⁵⁾

Religion for Tagore is a personal manifestation, and yet it does not cut man off from the social dimension of his life—it is not ruggedly individualistic in nature. The result of the union between the Personal Ultimate and religiously grasped man is an ever widening aura of activity and area of services which link that enlightened man to the affairs of other men. The religious man's sphere of activities is not to be isolated from the crowded marketplaces of the world, where most men live. Religion cannot cut itself off from other men because of wealth, class, status, or professed allegiance to religious labels. Rather, its sympathy is with all men, in order to teach, direct and lead them to the loving relationship with the loving Person.

Tagore had been involved in several social concerns of national and international import, and from that experience he learned not to naively accept all such social drives equally. His incisive judgment is worthwhile when he says, "Men who have strong social instincts are not necessarily lovers of men... Reckless spending creates a vacuum which we fill up with the debris of activities, whose object is to bury time." ²⁶⁾ Religious man too can become entangled in a maze of activities which are abstracted from man to whom love is required. One's fellow concern stems from the union with Personal Love.

Conclusion

The religion of man, artistically expressed by the poet pictures a

²³⁾ *Ibid.*, 252.

²⁴⁾ Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 27.

²⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, 3

²⁶⁾ Tagore, *Thought Relics*, 48.

man on his pilgrimage in search of meaning and fulfillment. His union with the Personal Ultimate cannot be expressed wholly by words, but when verbal forms are employed, song, dance and poetry breathe love, joy and trust. Having exhausted verbal forms, the religious and artistic man realizes that beyond the verbal barriers there exists a sphere incapable of being pressed into words. How can one speak of it? Tagore calls it "silence" or "silent salutation." Religion cannot be confined to an individualistic concern with the "I" alone, for the relationship is one of love in which the I is united with the Thou. Such an I-Thou religion is ventilated in other personal relations with man in his everyday activities, man in all states and stages of life, an I-you experience. By loving man one can carry God's love into the sphere of common life. The social instincts of man are not to be killed by confining concerns, but the realm of altruistic interest is that in which the religion of man is to be both practiced and continually developed. These are some of the fireflies twinkling in the darkened sky of the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore—some of his song offerings to Personal Love.

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