

## ***My Religion: A Scaffolding for My Temple***

**Prema Nandakumar**

**P**ERHAPS I HAVE BEEN LUCKY. It was not my choice to be born in a Shrivaiishnava family. While Vaishnavism refers to all the creeds that consider Vishnu or one of his incarnations as the Supreme, Shrivaiishnavism sees the Supreme as a two-as-one, Shri, Lakshmi and Vishnu. My natal home has always given importance to

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certain external ways of behaviour and action associated with the practice of the religion. Being brought up in the tiny village of Kodakanallur on the banks of the Tambraparni river for the first few years of my life, I imbibed certain elements of body language from my grandmother. Whenever she took me to the temple I had to prostrate and offer salutations at the entrance, at the flag-staff, and the image of Garuda before entering the *mukha-mandapa*, the front hall.

### Growing Up with Rituals

While going round the *parikrama*, circumambulation, I had to stop in my tracks at a particular place, look up at the *vimana*, the structure covering the sanctum, keep my palms together to show humility and recite: '*vimanam, pranavakaram, sarva papa vinashanam*; the covering of the sanctum, of the form of Pranava, and the destroyer of all evils'. When the priest kept the Shri-Satari on my head, I had to say, '*dhanyosmi, dasosmi, anugrahitosmi*; I have been blessed, I am your servitor, I have been given your guardianship'. Such external markings and recitations were part of all the branches of day-to-day living. Even when I had to gulp down some medicine, I had to close my eyes before taking it and utter a prayer: '*Sharire jarjare-bhute vyadhi-graste kalevare, aushadham jahnavi toyam vaidyo narayano hari*; for an ill body become infirm, Narayana Hari is the doctor and the medicine is Ganga water.' Each time my grandmother would explain that this is a prayer to Narayana who is the doctor who will cure the suffering in my body through this medicine which is actually a representative of Ganga water.

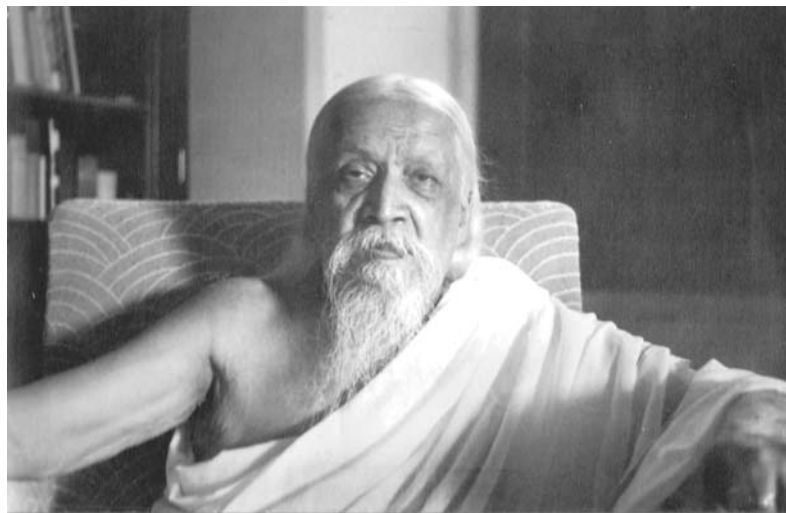
What seemed mechanical in those distant days appears now as the life-springs of spiritual living linked to a positive outlook in my advanced age. This lambent faith in customs that had an immediate significance and no doubt, a long-term humanising touch, were most welcome. I know now that this was the creative discipline inculcated in me which helps me regulate my life in a way that I feel free to breathe comfortably in any atmosphere, the

surrendered being within unaffected by the complications of external living. Shrivaisnavism has taught me by its *acharya-parampara*, the unbroken tradition of teachers, that one should surrender to the Divine and one should have humility. I am glad I was brought up this way; today I may or may not need any of the external disciplines but I continue to follow them, as that gives me a sense of safety. And, perhaps, to a very small extent, it gives the younger generations something to hold on to in the home atmosphere. As when my granddaughter, little Mythili shows me how she has learnt a new *kolam* for Friday, and the very young grandsons receive holy water and flowers in the temple from the priest, looking at me through the corner of their eyes seeking an approving smile. I am sure when they grow up, even if they are driving a spaceship, these little touches of religious discipline will give that calm to go ahead with the work at hand.

### Religion and Spirituality

At the same time, I know that religious discipline is not all. It is but a help to attain the wider spaces of spirituality. I had not understood this

Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950)



clearly till Sri Aurobindo placed before me a wonderful simile:

The highest spirituality indeed moves in a free and wide air far above that lower stage of seeking which is governed by religious form and dogma; it does not easily bear their limitations and, even when it admits, it transcends them; it lives in an experience which to the formal religious mind is unintelligible. But man does not arrive immediately at that highest inner elevation and, if it were demanded from him at once, he would never arrive there. At first he needs lower supports and stages of ascent; he asks for some scaffolding of dogma, worship, image, sign, form, symbol, some indulgence and permission of mixed half-natural motive on which he can stand while he builds up in him the temple of the spirit. Only when the temple is completed, can the supports be removed, the scaffolding disappear. The religious culture which now goes by the name of Hinduism not only fulfilled this purpose, but, unlike certain other credal religions, it knew its purpose. It gave itself no name, because it set itself no sectarian limits; it claimed no universal adhesion, asserted no sole infallible dogma, set up no single narrow path or gate of salvation; it was less a creed or cult than a continuously enlarging tradition of the Godward endeavour of the human spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Such is India's ancient religion, the Sanatana Dharma. Sri Aurobindo has caught the vital need of the human psyche to hold on to something even to understand materialistic philosophies like rationalism and atheism. At the

same time, I learnt that my religion which gives me 'something to hold on to' is not a confining space but a liberating force. Again and again the chants I heard took me to the world beyond the area of a small Indian village. When the elders were engaged in ritual worship, they never failed to conclude their rituals with prayers for the entire humanity: '*Sarve janah sukbinah bhavantu*; let all people become happy.' Such inclusiveness!

I grew older; I moved into cities, I was exposed to our scriptures. Not in any formal way for there are no such initiations for the girls in our families. But it was a scholar's home and studying books on Indian culture and listening to scripture-recitations was a way of life. This was when I was exposed to the great *shanti* mantras and was astonished to find the ancient seers take the entire humanity in one sweep to give their blessings: '*Om sarvesham svastir bhavatu, sarvesham shantir bhavatu, sarvesham purnam bhavatu, sarvesham mangalam bhavatu, Om Shanti Shanti Shanti*; Om, let there be the well-being of all, let there be peace for all, let there be fulfilment for all, and let there be welfare of all. Om, peace, peace, peace.'

This prayer is for the well-being, peace, prosperity, and auspiciousness for all. Such was the global, inclusive outlook of our forefathers. In my journey to gain self-knowledge I read scriptures of other religions. None of them went beyond 'my' and the immediate present. I saw no global outlook. Of course, this may have been due to the translations on which I had



Thiruppan Alvar (c. 2760 BCE)

to depend. So I have remained firmly rooted to the Sanatana Dharma which has happily given me enormous elbow room to study other pathways to God as well, never shutting me up in 'my religion'.

### **The Inclusive Psyche**

Prayers calling for '*sarve janah sukbinah bhavantu*' were made to percolate into the Shrivaisnava psyche. At the same time, the enquiring mind was never shut off. Till one could be sure of oneself and would not need any support system, the householder went on with his ritual-ridden life. Between rituals and the questing mind one lived, till one could become part of the universal psyche of '*sarve janah*' instead of just thinking about them. That was when one became spiritual and ready for sannyasa. As far as Hinduism is concerned, rituals do not come in the way of your enquiry or reaching out to spiritual oneness with other pathways. This has been demonstrated in the lives of many great people. Nearer home, I found my mother-in-law, the famous Tamil writer Kumudini, to be very particular about ritual worship of the household deity and the attendant 'achara' in vessels used for cooking and one's garments. At the same time, it was no contradiction for her when she went and served in the Sevagram, corresponded with Gandhiji and found a home for destitute women and children in Tiruchi, the Tiruchi Seva Sangam, which has been doing exemplary service to the marginalised and the poor irrespective of caste and creed. I guess this was because Kumudini was a Shrivaisnava and Tirupan Alvar, a Dalit saint of the Shri Vaishnava canon was revered at



Renganayaki Thatham aka Kumudini (1905-86)

home. Indeed, her translation of J C Kumarappa's *Precepts of Jesus* as *Yesunadhar Bodhanai* is a classic.

I go to an earlier generation and contemplate upon the life of my maternal grandfather. My earliest memory is when I was five years old. He had passed away by the time I was fourteen years old. He was a widower and my mother was his only child. He was so orthodox that he would not eat food cooked

by my mother as she had not undergone the initiation ceremony of *Panchasamskara*. As a Superintendent of Post Offices, he had to travel a good deal but he never ate in a stranger's house. He would carry a neatly-packed, self-sufficient set of utensils and would cook his food. If this was not possible, he was content with a couple of plantains and water offered to his personal deity, the Salagrama.

But he never imposed this rigidity in his personal life on the younger generation. He realised that new times demanded new kinds of search and new disciplines. This is how he bought the two-volume edition of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and gave it a place among his scriptures. He must have been drawn to it deeply for it was preserved carefully and given to my mother and has the pride of place as the first of the literature on the 'new' religion—spirituality of our times in our family. For my grandfather it was obvious that his religious discipline in the Vedic stream kept the windows open for a new breeze. Surely a moment comes for such questing persons when they recognise the soul-oneness in all, and then the religious discipline takes a back seat. But it is not given up altogether. This is to

help the younger generations imbibe the spirit of the religion of their forefathers. It chimes in with Krishna's telling Arjuna in the Bhagavad-gita that though he is beyond action, he continues with it like King Janaka, lest men give up action altogether: 'Whatsoever the superior person does, that is followed by others. What he demonstrates by action, that, people follow. I have, O son of Pritha, no duty, nothing that I have not gained, and nothing that I have to gain, in the three worlds; yet, I continue in action. If ever, I did not continue to work, without relaxation, men, O son of Pritha, would in every way, follow in My wake.'<sup>2</sup>

This is why great acharyas never gave up the discipline of religion. Adi Shankara, Sri Ramanuja, Sri Madhvacharya have all followed the religious commands, while they were also fully emancipated from the feeling of 'I-ness'. Swami Vivekananda was much drawn to Sri Ramanuja in this regard, though he knew how much importance he gave to religion. Swamiji's own disciple, Alasinga Perumal was such a strict follower of Shrivaisnava rules which included the drawing of a conspicuous *namam*, mark on his forehead. Religion and spirituality are not incompatible companions as revealed in the following incident in Sri Ramanuja's life. When a Shrivaisnava brahmin, Periya Nambi carried food to the house of the Dalit devotee Maraner Nambi, Ramanuja raised no objection. The Dalit, Maraner Nambi was sick and needed help.

### **No Strangers**

When Maraner Nambi died, Periya Nambi performed the last rites for his close friend. At this there was a lot of criticism from the orthodox public, but Ramanuja quelled it all by standing firmly behind Periya Nambi. He also named the Dalit community 'Tirukulatthar' or people

belonging to Lakshmi's fold. Swami Vivekananda says:

Then came the brilliant Ramanuja. Shankara, with his great intellect, I am afraid, had not as great a heart. Ramanuja's heart was greater. He felt for the downtrodden, he sympathised with them. He took up the ceremonies, the accretions that had gathered, made them pure so far as they could be, and instituted new ceremonies, new methods of worship, for the people who absolutely required them. At the same time he opened the door to the highest spiritual worship from the Brahmin to the Pariah. That was Ramanuja's work. That work rolled on, invaded the North, was taken up by some great leaders there; but that was much later, during the Mohammedan rule; and the brightest of these prophets of comparatively modern times in the North was Chaitanya.<sup>3</sup>

Adi Shankara's Advaita spoke of Brahman as the only Truth and added in the same breath that the world is an illusion, *mithya*. However, he knew the value of religion and that is why despite his own views, he went around India restoring temples to their original glory, removed encrustations like the Kapalika sect and built new temples. He also organised the wandering renunciates into ten denominations and established monasteries with elaborate rituals. His Sanskrit hymns, in particular, balance religion and spirituality in a perfect manner. The *Annapurna Ashtakam* speaks of Goddess Vishalakshi to give alms to the suppliant. The immediate meaning is clear: the prayer of every hungry person for food to sustain the body.

At a somewhat deeper level, the suppliant is asking for the alms of knowledge, *jnana-bhiksha*. Religion and spirituality hold hands together when we move steadily and reach the concluding verse: '*Mata cha parvati devi, pita devo maheshvarah, bandhavah shiva-bhaktashcha, svadesho bhuvana trayam*'; Goddess Parvati is my mother. God



Narsinh Mehta (c. 1409–88)

Maheshvara is my father. All devotees of Shiva are my family. All three worlds are my home.’

This is the very essence of spirituality. There are no strangers in this world since all of us are children of the Divine. Call the Divine by any name to pander to local mythos, he still remains the Divine, god-like as its Latin root suggests, ‘divinus’ as also *deva* in Sanskrit and Zeus in Greek. If Shankara juxtaposes religion and spirituality in one verse, Sri Aurobindo gives a long passage on the nature of spirituality in his poem, *Savitri*. The canto is ‘The House of the Spirit and the New Creation’:

Attuning to one Truth their own right rule  
Each housed the gladness of a bright degree,  
Alone in beauty, perfect in self-kind,  
An image cast by one deep truth’s absolute,  
Married to all in happy difference.  
Each gave its powers to help its neighbours’  
parts,  
But suffered no diminution by the gift;  
Profiteers of a mystic interchange,

They grew by what they took and what they gave,  
All others they felt as their own complements,  
One in the might and joy of multitude.<sup>4</sup>

But this future of the entire humanity thinking and becoming one is still far away. Meanwhile one has to inculcate this spiritual oneness slowly and surely. Can it be done?

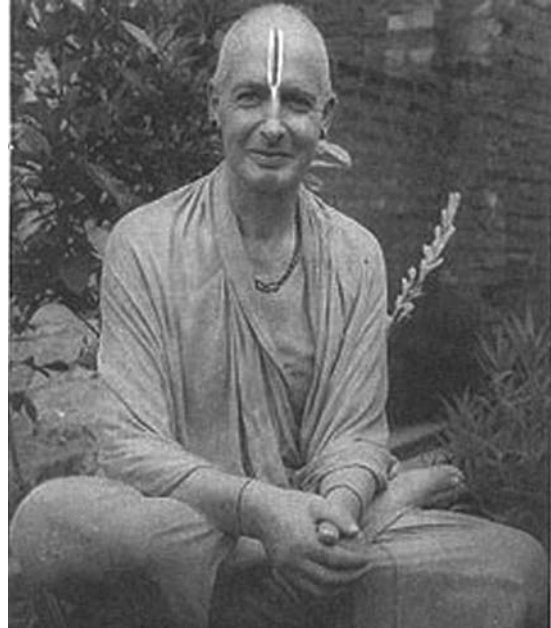
Spiritually advanced people have never lost hope in this matter. It can be done, is their message. One way of doing it is placing constantly a positive picture before mankind. This has been taken up to a great extent by the concept of dharma in India. If a person follows dharma in dealing with one’s fellow human beings, then one is moving towards the spiritual oneness of man. The Mahabharata, for instance constantly harps upon dharma, as when it repeats ‘*ahimsa paramo dharmah*; non-violence is the greatest virtue.’<sup>5</sup> The ‘Bharata Savitri’, an annexure to the epic proclaims: ‘*Urdhva bahur viraumyasha na cha kashchid shrunoti may, dharmad arthashcha kamashcha sa dharmam kim na sevayate*; with uplifted arms I am crying aloud but nobody hears me. From righteousness is wealth as also pleasure. Why should not righteousness, therefore, be courted?’ (18.5.49).

The sage says that although no one is listening to him, he will go on speaking about how dharma brings eternal happiness to a body that is by its very nature impermanent. This is why our elders have never felt that the retelling of our moral codes in various garbs is redundant. Bhartrihari’s Sanskrit aphorisms, Tiruvalluvar’s Tamil Kural, Vemana’s Telugu Shatakam, and so on. Our culture has a Himalayan amount of literature in this respect and can never be brushed aside as ‘mere religion’.

Again, the karma theory has been a deterrent too. Except for hardened criminals, the commoner believes that if we do an evil act, we may escape the consequences in this birth but it is sure to catch us in our next birth. This theory is common to all religions born in India, including


Buddhism and Jainism. The most beautiful statement of this culture comes from Narsinh Mehta, a Vaishnava saint from Gujarat in his song, '*Vaishnava jana to tene kahiye jo peed parayi jane re*', a favourite of Mahatma Gandhi. The opening verse sets the tone of spirituality that is linked to religion and yet goes beyond it: 'They who experience the pain afflicting others, they who proffer help to persons who are in sorrow, they who are not egoistic and keep away from pride—they are the ones called as true devotees of Lord Vishnu.'

Finally, both the concepts of dharma and karma get their active image in one's personal life which is largely dictated by the discipline of the religion to which one belongs or the discipline imposed by a spiritual quest that leads one to a guru. It was when I was reading the life of Sri Krishnaprem that I understood not only the value of religious discipline but also the need to follow it to help those who are with us and those who may come after. An Englishman who was working as a professor in Lucknow, Ronald Nixon became the disciple of Yashoda Ma, a realised soul of the Gaudiya Vaishnavite tradition. He built an ashrama at Mirtola in the Himalayas where he set up an image of Krishna. After Yashoda Ma's passing, he continued with his orthodox life. He was also a brilliant writer and mystic. Once Dr Basishwar Sen, the beloved student of Dr Jagdish Chandra Bose asked his friend Sri Krishnaprem: 'If my widowed grandmother followed all this ritualistic procedure, I could understand. But you have had such a different background. Back in your Cambridge days you must even have eaten plenty of beef. How is that you can observe such orthodox restrictions?' Pat came the reply from the great yogi who had achieved the highest spiritual plane of *samatva*, equanimity: 'I believe that any self-imposed discipline, external or internal, is rather a good thing in this present age, when every kind of social and individual restraint



Sri Krishnaprem (1898–1965)

is being discarded. Besides this is the path laid down by those, who have gone before me and reached the goal. Who am I, just entering the path, to say, "I will do this and not that, accept this discipline, but not that?" I accept the whole.<sup>6</sup>

Salutations to such flaming pioneers of the Omnipotent who have shown us the way to reach our goal: 'The labourers in the quarries of the gods, the messengers of the Incommunicable, the architects of immortality.'<sup>7</sup> 

### References

1. Sri Aurobindo, *The Foundations of Indian Culture* (New York: Sri Aurobindo Library, 1953), 138.
2. *Gita*, 3.21–3.
3. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3. 265.
4. Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri* (Pondicherry: Aurobindo Ashram, 1997), 326.
5. *Mahabharata*, 1.11.12–6.
6. O B L Kapoor, *The Saints of Viraja* (Delhi: Aravali, 1999), 299.
7. *Savitri*, 344.