



International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)

A Peer-Reviewed Monthly Research Journal

ISSN: 2394-7969 (Online), ISSN: 2394-7950 (Print)

ISJN: A4372-3144 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3145 (Print)

Volume-III, Issue-VII, August 2017, Page No. 102-108

Published by: Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.irjims.com>

Structural Dearth in the Ontological Argument: The Consequential Death of Theism and Its Impact on Religion

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Abstract

Max Muller said that the history of man is the history of religion. His words highlight the important space that Religion occupies in man's life. D. Miall Edwards writes, 'It was said long ago, and it has been frequently repeated, that "the proper study of mankind is man". And the study of man can never be complete unless it includes the study of religion, for there is no more widespread, impressive, or significant thing in history than religion.....it is the most important and outstanding feature of human life'(9). It, therefore, becomes necessary to philosophize religion in order to single out its ultimate meaning, validity and ground. This paper is an attempt to probe into the evolutionary peak of Religion that was instantiated in the form of Theism (Monotheism to be specific) and show those deadly theistic elements which poisoned its pious structure. The paper further attempts to give a logical picture of how Theism has died owing to the inconsistencies involved in the Ontological Argument that intended to glorify God-ism proving God's existence, but proved otherwise. It finally concludes with the argument that the demise of theism is actually a blessing in disguise for religion, for this would help Religion regain its lost purity and reopen the passage for the element of "secularism" to enter the sacred altar. The model proposed for this new perspective is that of Humanism, which is undoubtedly the most secular of all religions.

Key Words: Religion, Ontological Argument, Monotheism, Existence, Humanism.

Religion, says D. M Edwards, 'is man's reaction to the totality of things as he apprehends it,It is a way of life rather than a theory, but a way of life which by implication contains or suggests a theory' (12). This well-furnished definition of Religion points to the fact that the play-ground of religion is a comprehensive one. The noun "Religion" and the adjective "Religious" are not something that have limited denotations in particular instances of some individuals or of some groups. It is "mankind's" reaction to the totality of things. Every human being has some or the other opinion about or reaction towards it. And this feeling that mankind shares is what forms the essence of Religion. This becomes crystal clear from the etymological roots of Religion. The word Religion is derived from the root word "Religare" which means "to bind together". Religion, therefore, is that

force which binds men together. It is a fundamental human attitude that performs the task of connecting people across time and space. And this element of binding people together is, I believe, the essential feature that makes any shared belief a Religion. From a broader perspective, that alone can be called a “religion” which would be able to bind the humankind together in a valuational framework ensuring wholesome development of the race enveloped by the cherished ideals of love and peace. Religion must always be “perspectival” and “thought-invoking”, but this does not mean it should be bereft of emotion, for that can never be the case. Religion is, as Mathew Arnold’s dictum says, “morality touched with emotion”. It has to do a lot with man’s feelings, but the problem arises when this emotional aspect is given unprecedented priority by totally ignoring the rational one. This is evident from the words of Schleiermacher when he says, “Pure religion is pure feeling – i.e., feeling disconnected from thought on the one hand, and from morality or action on the other. Religion has nothing to do with knowledge; quite apart from it, its nature can be known”(Edwards, 139-140). This kind of opinion has been the reason behind the formation of distorted religious beliefs leading to the derailment of religion from its flowery path to one that is full of thorns. Religion is now identified with Theism, or more specifically Monotheism, and this identification has resulted in a chaotic world-order in which there is conflict among religions. But a plunge into the cause behind this needs a prior analysis of the history of religion that features in the timeline of the human race.

A study of religion by the yardstick of time requires an enquiry into the pivotal question of its origin and development. There are some modern theories regarding the origin of religion, which broadly follow two approaches – the anthropological approach and the psychological approach. ‘The former is concerned with the historic, or rather the prehistoric, origin of religion’(Edwards,34). It is the anthropological way that will be focused on to get a perfect picture of the development of religion in the historical plane. Animism or the Animistic theory of E. B. Tylor is considered to be the first theory of the origin of religion ‘that was backed up by a thoroughly scientific study of the mind and habits of the savage’(Edwards, 36). The crux of Animism lies in its act of imparting life to all the things and beings of nature that surrounded man. Edwards writes, “...at a certain stage of culture men everywhere attributed a kind of soul to the phenomena of Nature – e.g., to trees, brooks, mountains, clouds, stones, stars. Primitive man regarded all he saw as possessing a life like unto his own”(36). “Religion had its origin in the attempt of man to establish a relationship between him and certain of the spirits with which the world around him was peopled, and this would lead him to seek to propitiate the powerful spirits and to exorcise the evil ones”(Edwards,37). Thus, Animism is the most rudimentary form of religion where a slight hint of man’s realisation of his connection with the things and beings of nature is felt. Another anthropological theory of the origin of religion is the “Ghost-theory” of Herbert Spencer, which “finds the origin of religion in the worship of ancestors appearing in the form of ghosts. Some awe of the ghosts of the departed prevails widely among savages, and as far back as we can go men are seen offering sacrifices to the spirits of their ancestors. This Herbert Spencer believed to be the most primitive form of religion, the one which accounts for and development into the other forms. The fear of the dead who

has passed beyond the control of the living was the motive which led to the observance of religious rites” (Edwards,39). Spencer’s theory highlights “fear” as an indispensable element that gave rise to religion as we know it today; and there certainly is some truth in it, because a close study of the prevailing religious practices show that at least some of them, if not all, are done to appease the deities for it is feared that they would otherwise make our lives difficult. The third and the most popular theory is Totemism. D. M. Edwards explains Totemism in these words – “A totem is a species of animal or plant, or more rarely a class of inanimate objects, to which a social group (a clan) stands in an intimate and very special relation of friendship or kinship – frequently it is thought of as the ancestor of the clan – and which provides that social group with its name. The totem is not exactly a god, but a cognate being and one to be respected. It must not be used for common purposes, nor must it be slain or eaten except in some solemn and sacramental way. It is always the species and never an individual animal or plant that is regarded as a totem.”(41).So in Totemism is seen the germs of modern religious variants wherein a number of beings are being worshipped as being sacred or holy. Jevons even goes to the extent of saying that polytheism is a relapse from totemism. However, the three anthropological theories provide a good guide to the historical roots of man’s religious consciousness. They also point out with fairly good reasons that the origin of religion is bereft of any Divine source, it is rather in man’s constitution that the germs of religion are to be found.

On the side of development of Religion, it may be said that there has been a gradual transformation from “tribal religion” to “theism”. From rudimentary forms of Animism and totemism to higher forms of Spiritualism and God-centrism. From the claim that “Nature has spirit” to the claim that “God is a spirit, and whosoever worships Him, must worship Him in spirit and in truth”. This graduation has been psychologically explained by scholars who see it as a development of man’s religious instinct into a feeling, a higher order consciousness that led man to realise his absolute dependence on the infinite. This shift from basic religion to a higher order religion is measured by most thinkers by the parameter of progress. But I believe this to be a regression instead. Because in each step, the diameter has been narrowed finally resulting in there being only one God, who is a personal God, to be worshipped and have faith in. Theism, as Hick writes, ‘is a belief in a personal deity’ (5). Though it has different offshoots in the form of “Polytheism”, “Henotheism”, etc., they all ultimately boil down to “Monotheism” or “One-God-ism”, which ‘is the belief that there is but one Supreme Being, who is personal and moral and who seeks a total and unqualified response from human creatures’(Hick,6). Polytheism or “Many-gods-ism” assigns a particular god for each department of life, but it has in it the monotheistic tendencies as are seen when in Hindu tradition (which is polytheistic) despite there being other deities, it is the “Ista-devata” on whose pada, the bhakta wilfully submits himself. In Henotheism too, though many gods are believed in, allegiance is restricted to only one, who is considered the Supreme. So, it may be said that at the final stage of evolution, religion has taken the shape of Monotheism. Christianity, Islam, Judaism and other major world religions are monotheistic traditions.

Religion lost its capacity to breathe under the clutches of monotheism. It suffocated under the dense cover of Essentialism which totally clouded its etymological roots. Religion which was meant to bind people together now became the cause of conflict among religions. And the reason behind this is monotheism which carried with it the deadly belief that there can only be one true religion, and that this is one's own. The adherents of monotheistic traditions are blinded by the wrong supposition that their religion alone knows the truth and is the locus of salvation. This results in conflict because they hold that the others are false, at least in so far as their beliefs are incompatible with those taught by one's own. It is the exclusivism of truth-claims that is typical of these traditions which make them pockets of dispute. The central claim made by all these traditions is something that is more or less similar, and that is about God. All these traditions consider God to be the Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer of the World. He is an infinitely Supreme Being, who is Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnibenevolent. He is a Divine person who is the controller of everything. On Him, the believers have faith and He is the object of worship. These claims are made about a personal god who is believed to be out there somewhere governing the functioning of the Universe. The major point to be noted here is that, this God of monotheism is thought of as an existent being; He is the Divine One who actually exists. And that is why theologians have given arguments to prove His existence. The most intellectually challenging argument is the Ontological argument which tries to prove God's existence from the Idea of God. But quite interestingly, it ends up proving only the existence of the concept of God in our mind. This Structural inconsistency in the Ontological Argument gives a fatal blow to the edifice of Theism, and as such it collapses. Though the Ontological argument has different versions, including the modal version, yet I would present the one given by its originator Saint Anselm, and show that it, far from being a proof of God's existence, is rather a proof of His non-existence or His existence as just an idea in our minds.

Anselm in his work "Proslogion" defined God as "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived" or the greatest conceivable being and then presented the Ontological argument in two forms. The first form of the argument makes a distinction between something x existing in the mind alone and its existing in reality as well. Since the later is more perfect than the former, so, he argues, God must be existing in reality. The argument goes thus –

"If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-can-be-thought. But this is obviously impossible. Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality."(Hick,16)

In the second form of the argument, Anselm strengthens the case by bringing in the notion of God's "uniquely necessary existence". The argument is thus –

“For something can be thought to exist that cannot be thought not to exist. Hence, if that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought can be thought not to exist, then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is not the same as that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought, which is absurd. Something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists so truly then, that it cannot be even thought not to exist.”(Hick,16)

Though Anselm’s argument appears to be sound, it is not so. Kant, Russell and others have pointed out that Anselm has, very wrongly, considered “Existence” to be a “Predicate”, while it is not so. Kant opines, “Being is obviously not a real predicate, that is, it is not a concept of something which would be added to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations as existing in themselves. Logically it is merely the copula of a judgement”(Smith,282). So, the statement “God exists” does not add anything to the meaning of the concept ‘God’. It is just a “linguistic confusion”. This logical error in Anselm’s argument shows that God’s real existence as a Supreme Being cannot be proved. But his argument has at least proved that there is an undeniable concept of God in our minds. This is evident from the words of J. Hick when, in ‘The Existence of God’, he mentions that an entity of highest perfection does imply its existence by its very name, but from this, it does not follow that the existence, thus implied, is any real/actual existence; it only indicates that the concept of existence is inseparably united with the concept of the Highest Being. That means, from the idea of God we can move to the idea of His existence, but not to His real existence. This indicates that God is nothing but an idea in the minds of man. It also points to the fact that on a conceptual level, it is logically impossible to form an idea of a thing that is adorned with those attributes which point to its “Perfection” and not think of it as existing, for the very act of attribution requires it to first exist. So, the concept of God is logically inseparable from the concept of His existence, that is, to say anything about God or to even conceive of Him is to already assert His existence. But this existence is only conceptual existence and not real existence, because this inseparability of ideas is realised only in the conceptual plane, and this says nothing about God’s actual existence. This shows that God is nothing but a concept or an idea that we humans have. But the question that arises is “What is the source of this idea?” and “What kind of idea is it?”

Rene Descartes in his Meditations, tried to answer these questions, but failed miserably. He categorised all our ideas into three, viz., Adventitious ideas, or the ideas that are derived from experience; Factitious ideas, or the ideas that result from the interplay of experience and imagination; and Innate ideas, or the ideas that we are born with. Descartes being a theist wanted to prove that the God idea that we have is innate, but in doing so, he ended up committing the fallacy of begging the question, because for proving God, he already asserted Him as the source of Innate ideas. The blindfold of theism was responsible for Descartes’ mistake. He failed to notice that the idea of God is very much a Factitious idea, just like a unicorn or a sky flower. And there are evidences to this claim. In his work “Was Jesus God?” Richard Swineburne highlights the contradiction that pertains between the ideas of God as being Omnipotent and as not being able to do logically impossible actions.

God is described as Omnipotent, yet He is constrained – because He cannot do something that is logically impossible, i.e, an action that cannot be described without contradiction. This points to the fact that the Biblical dictum that Man is made after the image of God is false, because it is God who is fictitiously constructed after the image of man. The data is collected from experience and is magnified so as to give birth to the herculean figure called God who is an instantiation of man's wish-fulfilment. But because man's thinking capacity cannot go beyond the realm of logic, so He is not given the luxury of doing logically impossible actions. But He has been bestowed with Perfect Freedom which man cannot and does not enjoy, and so fulfils his wishes by seeing God do things freely, though not always fairly. God, thus, is nothing but a magnified human being with a lot more privileges and powers. God is just a figment of our imagination, and this becomes clear by a careful analysis of the monotheistic conception of God.

This claim is likely to slaughter the hopes of the theists who tried to shroud humanity under the intense cover of God-centrism. God-ism is holy, but not wise, for it cuts man from his human roots and transforms him into an aggressive animal who vehemently tries to defend his camp without any rational reflection whatsoever. And this is not a fancy assertion; the present world-order is its exemplification. I am also not asserting that only theism is responsible for this unrest, because there are instances where secular religions, like Marxism, etc. went wrong and created a chaos. But I preferred to focus on Theism because that stands in an intimate relation with the religious orientation of man. For most people, religion means theistic religion and therefore, it becomes so important to extensively analyse it. Since, God (as is now proved) is no more than just an idea, so Theism has to die. And if this be the case, then many thinkers will feel the urge to say that Religion will also come to an end. But I would like to differ from them in asserting that the demise of theism will mark not the end, but a new beginning of Religion. The advent of a God-free, secular religion. The model I suggest is that of Humanism or “manav-dharma” as Indian thinkers, like Tagore, Ramakrishna, Vivekanada and others have said, or “Existentialism” as was proposed by Sartre and others existentialists (for I second Sartre in his assertion that “Existentialism is Humanism”). Rabindranath Tagore writes, “The most perfect inward expression has been attained by man in his own body. But what is most important of all is the fact that man has also attained its realisation in a more subtle body outside his physical system. He misses himself when isolated; he finds his own larger and truer self in his wide human relationship. His multicellular body is born and it dies; his multi-personal humanity is immortal. In this ideal of unity he realises the eternal in his life and the boundless in his love.....The unity becomes not a mere subjective idea, but an energizing truth. Whatever name may be given to it, and whatever form it symbolizes, the consciousness of this unity is spiritual, and our effort to be true to it is our religion”(6). Almost as an echo of this is realised in the words of Vivekananda when he asks, “Where would you go to seek for God; are not all the poor, the miserable, the weak, God? Why not worship them first? Why go to dig a well on the shores of the Ganga?”(20)He also states, “Religion is not in doctrines, in dogmas, nor in intellectual argumentation; it is being and becoming; it is realisation”(27). From the other pole, Sartre, the existentialist, announces

Existentialism to be Humanism, and writes, “Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man..” (29). This wise words mark the shift of human realisation from essentialistic God-centrism to existential humanism. These hint to a new version of religion which is free from the cancerous grip of Theism. It is this modified version of religion that would bind man together again through its service towards humanity. It will find its essence in human existence. It will be valuational and perspectival in nature. And most importantly, such a way of life will embrace and kindle the lamp of Morality. It will teach and preach human values, making this world a better place to live in. Primarily, it will end the conflict that stalwart religions engaged in. For this will end the era of “many-religions”. It will bring with it the freshness of a new all-embracing way of life that includes all and leaves none.

To conclude, Religion, which is so integral to human life, must be philosophized upon and revised from time to time so as to ensure its healthy growth and positive influence on human existence.

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