

## RELIGION AND HUMAN PROGRESS

*[Address delivered to University Buddhist Brotherhood, at King George's Hall, University of Ceylon, Colombo, on Monday, 5th March, 1951.]*

When I was invited by the University Buddhist Brotherhood to deliver the 10th Anniversary lecture, I must confess that, while feeling honoured by the invitation, I felt a great deal of diffidence in accepting it. An association like yours, particularly on an occasion like this, has a right to expect an address from one who has specialised in and made a deep study of the subject. In my case, I am only an amateur, interested in the subjects of religion and philosophy, snatching a few spare moments in the course of a busy life to do a little reading and a little thinking on such matters as an intellectual relaxation from the ordinary routine of politics.

The subject I have chosen, "Religion and Human Progress", you will observe, has a far wider scope than if it were restricted solely to some Buddhist topic. I wish to deal with Buddhism and its place in the world today against the background of the history of the religious idea and the service it has rendered to human progress in general.

Today, man is called upon, as never before in human history, to face and decide certain fundamental issues of supreme importance to the future of the entire human race. One of these issues is whether the religious idea is in any way necessary to human happiness and progress, or whether it would be discarded as something that is false and indeed one that rather retards than helps human progress.

In considering this issue, however superficially, it is necessary to give some thought to the origin of the religious idea. You will remember the view of Lucretius that it originated in man's fear of the unknown. You will also remember that Sir James Fraser, with brilliant scholarship and a wealth of data, expressed the view that it had its origin in man's desire to utilise certain phenomena of nature for his own benefit. In pursuance of this theory, he felt that human thought would progress from magic to religion and from religion finally to science. That is the theory which he elaborated in his "Golden Bough".

The religious devotees, on the other hand, claimed that religion is a divine revelation of God's will to man, made from time to time by the deity to some chosen vessel.



I have evolved a theory of my own, justifying the religious idea on a reasonably rational ground. We know it as a fact that life takes steps to protect and foster itself e.g. the protective colouring of birds and animals, the maternal instinct, the sexual instinct, etc. Now, man has something which distinguishes him from all other animals—the human mind. We also note that no other animal possesses the religious idea even in a rudimentary form, although certain living things have many things in common with human beings and human society. Therefore, I am inclined to think that nature itself has provided the religious idea as a protective colouring for the human mind, in order that this wonderful thing, the human mind, may be used as a gift of the angels to bring happiness and progress to mankind, to protect and foster human life, rather than that it should be used as a curse of the devils, for the destruction of human life. Both alternatives are possible.

In deciding what precisely is the truth of the matter, we are faced with another question—the famous question of Pontius Pilate "What is truth ? ". This question of Pilate has been considered to be cynical, contemptuous, and so on. But I think it was a very serious question and deserving of serious consideration. The theory of relativity, so brilliantly propounded by Professor Einstein, has a far wider range of applicability, in my opinion, than the particular scope of his researches. Whatever may be the eternal verities, truth itself is in many ways a relative thing. What is true today, may not have been true yesterday, and may not be true tomorrow; what is true for one person, need not necessarily be true for another. Very often the whole truth lies neither entirely on one side or the other ; it is very often a rather puzzling compound of many things. So too, in this case, the whole truth may well be a compound of the various factors I mentioned, as well as others. But the point that emerges is, in my opinion, that the religious idea, whatever may or may not be the truth of religion from an objective point of view, is something that is necessary for human wellbeing and progress, something which it would be very unwise for man to discard.

At this point I must say a word about the subjective and objective. Here too there appears to be an indeterminate and nebulous border line between [them. I. am](#) reminded of the words of Christ " If ye have faith as much as a mustard seed ye can move mountains". This can only mean that subjectively if one believes that one can move a mountain, one can produce the objective result of actually moving the



mountain. There is a point apparently at which the subjective merges into the objective. It was quite rightly, therefore, that the Buddha in his supreme wisdom stressed the paramount importance of the human mind and of clear comprehension and right understanding. This entire line of thinking leads me to the inexorable conclusion that the religious idea is something that is essential for human happiness and progress, apart from the attempt to justify it on grounds of blind faith or discredit it by mere logical or scientific argument.

I now come to the second point I wish to consider : What has happened to the religious idea in the world of today ? There is no question that today it has reached a weaker and lower position than ever before in human history and that today it is engaged in a desperate struggle for its very existence. This has come about owing to various reasons. The capitalist system of society, with the strong emphasis that it has always laid on material gain and prosperity, tended to weaken the very spirit of religion. Communism, which in many ways is the logical outcome of capitalism, carried this process a step further. That is what happened in the Western world. In the East, which was the cradle of all the great religions, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, the same process took place, though for different reasons. Asia had for some hundreds of years been subject to western capitalist imperialism, and her great religions languished during this period of servitude.

Today, we are living in one of the most important periods of human history, at a period when a great world civilisation is crumbling and we are faced with the task of building a new civilisation to take its place. I generally accept the principle of the dialectic of a thesis, and antithesis out of which there would emerge a synthesis. There again, this is not the whole truth for there may be more than one antithesis to any given thesis, and therefore, the possibility of more than one synthesis would arise : the discovery of the correct [synthesis](#) is the problem that faces us all today. Another reason for the decline of the religious idea is to be found in organised religion. When a religion becomes an organised Church and when such an organised Church tends

