

## Would Veerashaivism fill One's Religious Needs in Today's world?

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Man's search for the meaning of life is as old as man himself. Anytime we have a moment to ourselves, the first question that comes to mind is: Why am I here, and what am I supposed to be doing? The question is not merely what do I want to do, but what should I do with it? The dilemma is not a practical one but a moral one.

Throughout human history, from the ancient Hindus and Greeks to the most modern societies, man has recognized the twin forces of science and religion. Science deals with our external world and material progress while religion helps us to deal with our internal world, those nagging questions that spring from that corner of the soul. Science tells us how things work and makes our daily living easy while religion helps us to make sense of our day-to-day lives. As humans, we crave for more than just the outside world, no matter what it is. It is the religion that provides the blueprint for man's spiritual growth and survival.

Some scholars refer to this aspect of our duality as logos and mythos – the two Latin words Logos is logic, reason, and science, while mythos is faith and religion. Both are essential and complementary to our total well-being and experience as humans. From time to time, whenever science and reason have made quantum leaps, the role of religion in human affairs has been challenged. One such example took

place during the 'Age of Reason' in eighteenth-century Europe. Advances in science convinced man that all nature could be reduced to a series of mathematical laws and the workings of the universe were seen to be orderly and simple. If the same rigor of reason could be applied to all other matters just as well, humankind's happiness would be assured. The reason, if followed logically as in the natural sciences, would replace tradition and faith. That was three hundred years ago and we know better, man's need for religion has never been greater. Science has marched on at an unprecedented pace since then and how little we know of our inner selves and how empty and isolated we feel. Some refer to it as being in a condition of permanent limbo and longing. Religion has filled this gap through the ages and continued to do so to this day. Religion's role has varied in relation to science and politics of the day, but it has never been eliminated.

Religion has stood the test of time and will always be with us. Most of human life is about hopes and fears, which are outside the realm of reason and it is the religion that helps us manage them in a way that we can accept the outcomes. Religion serves as a bridge from the known to the unknown and provides us comfort and peace. Religion teaches us charity towards all and malice towards none. It is the power to guide and guard our steps so

that we may choose the right from the wrong and the good from the bad.

It is obvious then that we need religion in our life to give us completeness and peace of mind. The next two sections examine two views on religion followed by a discussion of why religion ends up as a ritual. The last section discusses the applicability of Veerashivism to our life today.

Rabindra Nath Tagore, the poet laureate of 20th century, India, provides an interesting view of religion. If we want to light a lamp in a room, a lot of preparation is needed. We will have to depend on many people: lamp makers, sellers, and so on and so forth. Even with all the preparation and effort, the light that we get out of the candle is very little. It may satisfy the need to light the room but it makes the darkness outside even more than before. On the other hand, we do not have to depend on anyone to receive the light from the morning sky. We do not need to create anything. We just need to be awake and open our eyes. No one can resist the flood of light from the sky filling every corner of the world. Religion is similar to this light. Religion is as simple, infinite, and abundant as the light from the sky. It is the gift of God. It is eternal and all-pervading. It has silently engulfed humanity from all around. All that we need is a desire to receive it. We need only to open our hearts.

The key moral of the religion must be very simple and fulfilling. But we have

made our religion the most complex aspect of our life through artificial rituals, complex theories, and diverse imaginations. We are constantly creating new factions and groups to get out of our self-imposed complexities. These factions and groups teach us humility and belief in the grace of God. In its truest form, religion gives are always in conflict with each other creating unhappiness, war, and destruction. We have not been completely faithful to Religion.

Instead, we have tried to make Religion suitable to our imagination. We have adapted Religion to suit our day-to-day needs like all other material necessities of our life. There is no doubt that religion is the most important need of our life. We reduce its importance by making it fit our needs. Religion is beyond everything that we can conceive with our feeble mind. It gives us constant support because it is eternal.

There is no need to adopt a Religion. God is not what we comprehend. What we understand is not the Religion that is our world. It has all the symptoms of the world. The symptoms of the world are diversity and conflict. We are satisfied when we understand something. But what we understand keeps changing. We want to understand everything in search of happiness. But our happiness ends as soon as we understand. As Upanishad says "What is unlimited is happiness; there is no happiness to which that is limited". If we try to comprehend the unlimited with our limited perception,

it will create unhappiness. Therefore we must try to realize the unlimited by detaching ourselves from the world. We will never be able to achieve it by applying material laws.

The simple moral of Religion did exist in Upanishad. Brahma's manifestation in Upanishad is very complete. He is Truth; otherwise, nothing would have been true in the universe. He is the Knowledge. All Knowledge that exists is His knowledge. He is limitless. The world is a manifestation of Brahma's limitless Knowledge and Truth. Upanishad has never tried to establish any particular deity or temple in any particular place. It teaches us to focus, only to feel the presence of Brahma in everything around us by eliminating all complexities of diverse and restless imagination.

Swami Vivekananda, the famous Hindu ascetic, thrilled the Western World with his eloquent exposition on Vedanta philosophy and religion in the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1894. In his lectures in London that year, he provided an interesting definition of Religion. According to him, of all *the forces that have worked and are still working to mold the destinies of the human race, none certainly is more potent than religion*. It is obvious that in very many cases the bonds of religion have proved stronger than the bonds of race, climate, or even descent. It is a well-known fact that persons worshipping the same God, believing in the same religion, have stood by each other, with much greater strength and

constancy, than people of merely the same descent. Various attempts have been made to trace the beginnings of religion. In all the ancient religions which have come down to us, we find one claim made that they are all super-natural, that their genesis is not in the human brain, but that they have originated somewhere outside of it.

Two theories have gained some acceptance amongst modern scholars. One is the *Spirit Theory of Religion*, and the other is the *Evolution of the Infinite*. The first maintains that ancestor-worship is the beginning of religious ideas, the other that, religion originates in the personification of the powers of nature.

Man wants to keep up with the memory of his dead relatives, and thinks they are living even when the body is dissolved, and he wants to place food for them and, in a certain sense, to worship them. Studying the ancient religions of the Egyptians, Babylonians, Chinese, and many other races in America and elsewhere, we find very clear traces of this ancestor-worship being the beginning of religion.

With the ancient Egyptians, the first idea of the soul was that of a 'double'. Every human body contained in it another being very similar to it, and when a man died this 'double' went out of the body and yet lived on somewhere and somehow. But the life of the 'double' lasted only so long as the dead body remained intact, and that is why we find among the Egyptians so much solicitude to keep

the body uninjured. And that is why they built those huge pyramids in which they preserved the bodies. For, if any portion of the external body was hurt, the 'double' would be correspondingly injured. This is ancestor-worship.

The scholars from the ancient Aryan literature show that religion originated in nature-worship. Although in India we find proofs of ancestor-worship everywhere, yet in the oldest records there is no trace of it whatsoever. In the Rig Veda Samhita, the most ancient record of the Aryan race, we do not find any trace of it. Modern scholars think it is the worship of nature that they find there. The human mind seems to struggle to get a peep behind the scenes. The dawn, the evening, the hurricane, the stupendous and gigantic forces of nature have exercised the human mind, and it aspires to go beyond, to understand something about them. In the struggle they endow these phenomena with personal attributes, giving them souls and bodies, sometimes beautiful, sometimes transcendent. Every attempt ends with these phenomena becoming abstractions whether personified or not. Thus, a very strong case has been made out, that religion has its origin in the personification of the powers of nature.

These two views, though seem to be contradictory, can be reconciled on a third basis which is the real germ of religion. This is, the struggle to transcend the limitations of the senses. Either, a man goes to seek for

the spirits of his ancestors, or the spirits of the dead, or he wants to get a glimpse of what there is after the body is dissolved, or he desires to understand the power working behind the stupendous phenomena of nature. Whichever of these is the case, one thing is certain, that he tries to transcend the limitations of the sense and to find answers to the questions raised at the outset of this inquiry.

In all organized religions, their founders, prophets, and messengers are declared to have gone into states of mind, that were neither waking nor sleeping, in which they came face to face with a new series of facts, relating to what is called the spiritual kingdom. They realized things much more intensely than we realized facts around us. Take, for instance, the religions of the Brahmins. The Vedas are said to be written by Rishis. These Rishis were sages who had realized certain facts. The exact definition of the Sanskrit word Rishi is a Seer of Mantras, of the thoughts, conveyed in the Vedic Hymns. These men declared that they had realized certain facts, and these facts they proceeded to record. Buddha sitting under the Bo-tree reached that superconscious state of mind. All his teachings came through this, and not through intellectual cogitation.

Thus, a tremendous statement is made by all religions, that the human mind, at certain occasions transcends not only the limitations of the senses but also the power of reasoning. It then comes face to face with things that it

could never have sensed, could never have reasoned out. These facts are the basis of all religions of the world. Of course, we have the right to challenge these facts, to put them to the test of reason, nevertheless, all the existing religions of the world claim for the human mind this peculiar power of transcending the limits of the senses, and the limits of reason; and this power they put forward as a statement of fact.

Apart from the consideration of the question of how far these facts claimed by religions are true, we find one characteristic common to them all. They are all abstractions as contrasted with the concrete discoveries of physics, for instance; and in all the highly organized religions they take the purest form of Unit Abstraction, either in the form of an Abstracted Presence, as an Omnipresent Being, as an Abstract Personality called God, as a Moral Law, or, in the form of an Abstract Essence underlying existence. In modern times, too, the attempts made to preach religions without appealing to the supersensuous state of the mind, have had to take up the old abstractions of the Ancients, and give different names to them, as “Moral Law”, the “Ideal Unity”, and so forth, thus, showing that these abstractions are not in the senses.

### **Religion and Rituals**

As Tagore has said, there has always been a tendency to adopt religion to suit our daily lives. If we accept that

the religion originated as either ancestor worship or nature-worship, a visualization of the power being worshipped helps focus on that worship. The various forms of this power in terms of idols or aids for worship have been adopted by all religions of the world. Along with the invention of idols, it has become natural to devise rituals to allow everyone to worship these idols. As the days go by, the meanings behind the idols and the rituals have vanished and a mechanical following has evolved.

In every religion, when the influence of rituals overrides the meaning of power behind them, a reformer has arrived to bring the meanings back. The followers of such a reformer end up creating an offshoot of the original religion which stays at the intellectual level for a while and becomes ritualistic eventually. This cycle of reformation and ritualization continues resulting in a multitude of gods and beliefs and rituals.

One cannot say that being ritualistic is sub-human. Rituals alone might satisfy the religious needs of most individuals. Look at the faces of individuals in the bhajan group singing the prayers in any temple or religious gathering. You will see peace and oneness with God (with no awareness of the material world). Some can go into this transient state just observing a priest perform an elaborate pooja of the deities.

For some, the ritualistic mode of being one with God may not be adequate. The four forms of Yoga prescribed for

Hindus might be an attempt to satisfy individuals of varying nature: **Karma Yoga** (based on performing the daily chores to offer them to God); **Bhakti Yoga** (Devotion, Bhajans, chanting as ways of reaching the almighty); **Jnana Yoga** (probing to understand God by contemplating his powers and learning more about why it is so) and **Raja Yoga** (the supreme form of all the four types, where one denies that “I” does not exist and one is part of God).

*Veerashivism* became popular in the twelfth century AD through the teachings of Lord Basaveswara and other Sharanas as an attempt to reform the society when religion and rituals were taking over the simple rules of humanity and equality among individuals. The main premise of *Veerashivism* is equity, justice, and equality, service with sacrifice, tolerance, and emphasis on humanism. It does not prescribe a place of worship, but advocates that one is aware of God's presence in everything and everywhere.

There are three aspects of *Veerashivism* that are pertinent to our examination of its practicality to our lives in the modern world.

They are the Five Codes of Conduct (Panchachara), The Sixfold Path (Shatsthala), and The Eight Aids (Ashtavarana).

The Five Codes of Conduct are considered to be the life-breath of the seeker of God. They are:

1. *Lingachara*, which prescribes consistent monotheism. It calls for a strict belief in one God represented by Ishtalinga.
2. *Sadachara*, which implies earning one's livelihood through pure and honest work and sharing a part of the earning for the welfare of society (Dasoha).
3. *Ganachara*, which prescribes courage to fight social evils and injustice.
4. *Shivachara*, which implies the presence of God in each being thus portraying social equality and nondiscrimination.
5. *Brityachara*, which is the practice of humility. Basaveswara says "*No one is smaller than me, there is no one greater than a true devotee*".

The Sixfold Path to reach God is very similar to the four Yogas mentioned earlier. The six progressive stages in which one seeks to be one with God are:

1. *Bhakti Sthala* - the stage of intense devotion and faith.
2. *Maheswara Sthala* - the stage of strong will and discipline.
3. *Prasadi Sthala* - the stage of all grace.
4. *Pranarlinga Sthala* - the stage of awareness of the Ultimate Reality (God) in life-breath.

5. *Sharan Sthala* - the stage of total surrender to God.
6. *Aikya Sthala* - the stage of sublime union with God.

The Eight Aids that guide the seeker in his path to reaching God are:

1. *Guru*, a teacher who imparts knowledge about the universal soul and Initiates one into Veerashivism.
2. *Linga*, the icon of Veerashivism implying monotheism, non-idol worship, aid for meditation and contemplation.
3. *Jangama*, a wandering spiritual teacher who invokes faith and devotion in the seeker.
4. *Vibhuti*, the sacred ash worn on the forehead, arms, and neck indicating that the seeker has reduced the negatives like lust, anger, greed, and envy to ashes.
5. *Padodaka*, the literal meaning is the water used to wash the feet of the Guru; implies that the seeker develops qualities such as humility and equality and washes away his ignorance.
6. *Prasada* indicates the acceptance of food by the seeker for is won and sharing with the society.
7. *Rudrakshi*, means 'The eye of Shiva', the sacred beads worn on the body indicating that the seeker

has opened his spiritual eye to look within, to realize God within.

8. *Mantra*, a set of words that allow the seeker to achieve quietness and introspection when chanted repeatedly.

The common Mantra for Veerashaivas has been "*Om Namah Shivaya*" salutations to Shiva, These aids are meant to nurture the faith of the seeker in achieving the ultimate purpose of life. They are not meant to be an end to themselves.

As we can see the Pancharas acceptable equally well to modern society no matter which religion one follows. The Shatsthalas prescribe a progressive way of life starting from the true worldliness ending in Godliness. The Ashtavaranas may be considered rituals and may not be completely applicable when taken literally. If one concentrates on their symbolism rather than the literal representation, they are quite practical even for this modern age. No wonder Veerashivism has been called Vishwa Manava Dharma (a religion that is applicable to the whole human world of all ages).