

Religion & Society:

Religious System: A Victim Of The Culture Of Consumerism(1)

by Dr. Mahip Singh

In this article, the eminent scholar, Dr. Mahip Singh, has made certain insightful observations on the historical aspects of various religious systems. These observations are applicable to the Jain system as well. - D. C. J.

The great medieval saint Kabir articulated that all worldly beings, in general, are slaves of materialism. Even those who engage in pursuit of divinity, condemn delusion considering it to be an obstacle in the path to devotion, are unable to free themselves from its fetters. Kabir observed that even a sage like Narad could not escape the grips of materialism.

It is observed that many religious personalities who desire to give up materialism, become deeply mired in material possessions. Their followers, who have a blind faith in them, are responsible for this. It appears that religion goes hand in hand with blind faith. And it is impossible to avoid corrupt practices in the serfdom of blind faith. In the final analysis, as time goes by, all religious traditions become engulfed in corruption. It seems that aberrations and transgressions wriggled into every religious system during the lifetime or passing away of their estimable leaders. Their successors and/or impassioned followers introduced various deviations. In this world, defilement of conduct is motivated by two predominant elements: material (KANCHAN) and sensual gratification (KAAMINI). All living beings first strive to satisfy their hunger, and then indulge in lust. Animals satisfy these needs in natural course. However, man has the ability to think, understand and adopt a variety of designs and means. Thus his ambitions know no bounds. He is not satisfied by food alone, he desires expensive elegant materials; mere woman does not suffice, he fancies enchanting beauties.

Religion plays a significant and prime role of restraining and regulating these insistent undesirable tendencies. The concepts of God and hereafter restrain the desires of man. These concepts keep him fearful and cautious about the unknown future. The phrase 'God fearing' (DHARM-BHEERU) refers to the ethical and virtuous segment of society. In every sphere of life, being fearful has a negative implication but in the field of religion it has a positive aspect as well. The concepts of religion, spirituality and belief in God are meant to free human beings from fear. However, it is ironic that the same concepts scare people by presenting narrations of merit and demerit, heaven and hell, the present life and beyond, pleasure and pain, affluence and poverty, health and sickness, and so on and so forth. Men who are scared run all over seeking security. Religious leaders, preachers, ministers, pastors and clergy invite people to seek the refuge of God. However, God is invisible. The only visible are these intermediaries - the go-betweens. So the individual ends up in the serfdom and subjugation of these holy men. Spiritual leaders claim that they will lead the individual to 'God'. But gradually these leaders themselves become the focus of the gullible common people. Instead of pursuing spiritualism, common men are enticed to indulge in the 'worship' of these go-betweens. They become the focus of attention of their followers. Now worldly affairs, greed for money and materials, and sensual gratification take hold. These corporeal beings, gurus, priests and clergy, command large entourage and considerable money and materials. Money and material become a measure of devotion. Those who donate large sums of

money are deemed prominent devotees. They are respected and honored. The irony is that in religious assemblies and celebrations, greed and materialism are deprecated in 'word' but given a manifest position in practice. The status of a temple or church is gauged by the amount of donations received.

... An interesting observation: it is bizarre that in the sphere of religion, an eminence, who claims to preach a unique path to realization of God and spiritual experience himself assumes the position of proximity to God. People consider him to be supreme, auspicious, guru or benefactor and begin to worship him. As people gather around him, anecdotes of his superhuman and miraculous powers and exploits circulate. An aura of 'myth' enshrouds his personality. Ordinary people and dignitaries, illiterate and educated, poor and rich, all congregate around him. In general, those who face greater risk, uncertainty and instability in their life and profession, congregate at the establishments of such 'great souls'. Such individuals depend on them, engage in serving them and aspire for their favors, and in the process, help expand and aggrandize their 'deluding creed' (MAYAJAAL). Unscrupulous politicians, illicit businessmen, gamblers, corrupt administrators, all take refuge at the feet of such 'holy men'. ...

These days, business employs the communication media to advertise various products. They vigorously advertise articles of daily necessities on radio, television, billboards and posters. In business enterprises, producing/procuring things and advertising their sale is an integral part of the culture of consumerism. Now, is it appropriate to make God, temples, churches, devotion and spirituality an aspect of the culture of consumerism? [In India and in other places as well] these days advertisements of individuals like a 'mother' (MATA) who enlightens the psyche of people or color posters of a 'guru' (BABA) who fends off miseries and provides spiritual knowledge are commonplace. Numerous 'saints', 'maharishis' and the like assert utmost righteousness, claim to have supernatural powers and manipulate to perform miracles. They spend millions in advertisements just like the manufacturers of soaps and toothpaste. Both are businesses - they invest a lot and earn a lot. The only difference is that those in the business of soaps and toothpaste have to invest their own money, maintain accounts and pay taxes, while those in the business of religion do not have to answer to anyone and accumulate considerable money and materials.

... [In general], politicians exploit certain anti-social elements of society to win elections and then give ample compensation for their favors. Now, instead of working behind the scenes, many of the religious fundamentalists have changed their tactics. Some of them enter into politics and run for various positions. ...

Kabir's observation that greed and intrigue infiltrates the lives of worldly beings (MAYA MAHA THHAGINI HUM JAANI) is not limited to householders and businesses only. Religious personalities like gurus, clergy, priests and scholars, who continually stigmatize greed as gravely sinister, deplorable and sinful, also are involved in the culture of consumerism linked to greed. This is an alarming trend.

Ultimately, this brings us to the incongruous current of blind faith. Belief and trust are considered as the two essential elements of religion. The slightest aberration in these leads to the domain of blind faith or blind trust. It is strange that from time immemorial, the entire operation of religion has been predicated on blind faith. It is so in spite of the fact that many religious personages [great souls such as Bhagwaan Mahaveer] have impelled their followers to discard blind faith and accept logical concepts only. They

have also denounced the culture of materialism and sensual gratification. Further, they have motivated their followers to adopt the path of love and service to humanity to eventually realize the status of the Supreme Being. However, it is strange and ironic that as time passes, the followers of such great souls build the hideous 'palaces' - symbols of the culture of materialism in the name of the great souls, predicated on blind faith - on irrational interpretation of the precepts of great minds.

What is more puzzling is that not only the uneducated masses but also highly educated and enlightened individuals are involved in this 'worship' of materialism in these times of significant advances in education, scientific progress, scientific disposition and social as well as religious awakening. Strangely, many individuals are enchanted by the so-called superhuman powers of unscrupulous monks. They believe in good luck charms like ashes, sweets, trinkets and talismans given by them. Some individuals mislead the unsuspecting laymen by serving as brokers of such religious leaders. However, this business will not stop. Again, Kabir has written: Addiction to materialism is immensely bewitching. All living beings wander on its account. (MAYA AEISI MOHINI BHAI, JETE JEEU TETE BHATAKAAEI.)

Footnotes:

1. English adaptation of a Hindi article published on the website of the Daily JAGARAN of March 2000.
2. It should be pointed out that Bhagwaan Mahaveer preached that we should not follow the teachings of our religion on account of fear of karmas or with a desire of any kind. Our religious practices should conform to rationalism - our concept of reality. Nevertheless, the observations and reflections on the religious system made by the distinguished scholar are equally relevant to the Jain system. - D. C. J.
3. This teaching implies that organizing religious celebrations such as prayers and worship for collecting funds or indulging in schemes of fund-raising in the name of religion is gross pursuit of materialism. These undesirable practices crept into the Jain system during the dark ages. We Jains should abandon such violations of spirit of Jainism. - D. C. J.