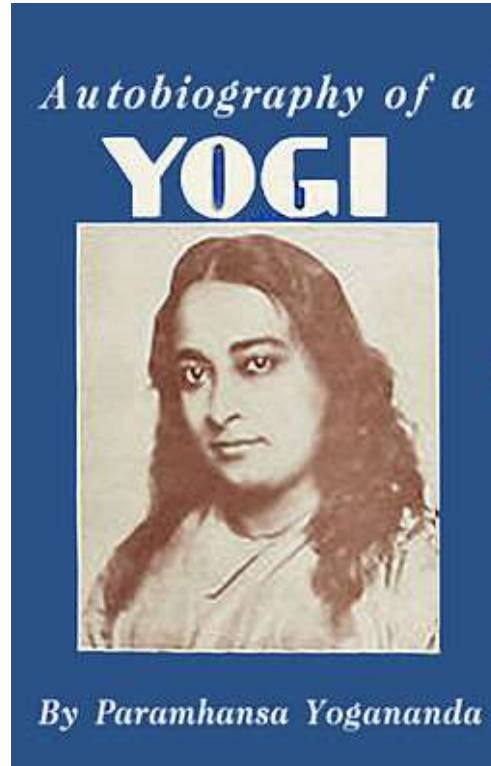


The Universality of Religion in Paramhansa Yogananda's Writing

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Sri. Sri. Paramhansa Yogananda

Sri. Sri. Paramhansa Yogananda (5 January 1893 – 7 March 1952) is a mastermind who has sought an abode of peace in heaven, but he survives through his thoughts. His *An Autobiography of a Yogi* is a major work. Besides his several writings in volumes and speeches, his *An Autobiography of a Yogi* is very unusual and extraordinary in giving us rich human thought. All unusual, uncommon human experiences which have superhuman touch have been clearly expressed and explained to us. In the modern context, Paramhansa Yogananda is the most powerful voice whose teachings and experiences awaken among the common human beings the spark of spiritual bliss.

Teachings of Paramhansa Yoganandaji

The role of teaching through various channels like books, speeches and discussions are of great significance. Yoganandaji has explained the meaning of religion to the world, not in the traditional sense of defining Godlike infinite omnipresent and omnipotent, but he explained this realisation of God through his personal experience. Paramhansa Yoganandaji practically began his life by bringing India's most ancient treasure of spiritual depth through scientific methods. He did it to explain this to the western world.

The Science of Religion

In 1920, he was invited to the United States as India's representative to an international conference of world religious readers in Boston. On this occasion, he lectured so wonderfully, and his maiden speech was published soon after as *The Science of Religion*. Since then, it has been published in several additional languages. This lecture was so potential with meanings used as a reference work in colleges and universities.

The Science of Religion (1923) contains basic thoughts in explaining the concept of God and in realising it through practical experience by following the technique of methods of *Kriyayoga*. The whole thing which Yoganandaji explains is almost science-based, through which Yoganandaji attempted to explain the significance and possibility of the unity of all religions in a very attractive manner. Because he has thoroughly studied all religious heads and prophets of the world. His message is universal, and it is based not on dogmatic beliefs but direct insight into reality gained through the practice of ancient scientific techniques of meditation.

An Autobiography of Yogi

Yoganandaji's autobiography *An Autobiography of Yogi* (1946) is a major work that contains and covers the vast experience of Yoganandaji right from his childhood days to the last moment of life. The autobiography is a wonderful and most arresting work of art. The whole book is highly entertaining and delightful. Therefore a lot can be learned from this autobiography.

Right from his childhood days, Yogananda cherished unusual dreams of having experience of dignity. As a student, Yogananda was more interested in knowing and experiencing spiritual matters rather than paying attention to his studies. However, Yogananda found himself more involved in imagining religious experiences. He was inspired and more motivated by the mysterious and mystic experiences which his parents have narrated. When the people, particularly his parents, observed Yogananda's inclination towards spirituality. He is the first type of such brain that introduced to science the philosophy of meditation through Yoga.

Kriyayoga

This autobiography throws light on the entire experience and practice of *Kriyayoga*. So much did he contribute to the world of *Kriyayoga* and mediation that every astonishing

comments expressed by the people of the World, mostly the intellectual world. *The New York Times* comments. 'a rare account'.¹ On account of the intellectual and philosophical, and scientifically religious autobiography News Week Times comments: 'A fascinating and annotated study. Of course, for the common person, this book does not yield deep meanings'.² But an intelligent reader can harvest much meaning through the writing in this autobiography.

The Meanings of Existence and the Search of God

The book throws light on the meanings of existence, the search of God and God's existence, who yields the definite answer. For example, the proof of God from where will he bring an answer to the basic questions like religion, God, Knowing God through realisation are some of the important areas that have been very scientifically but not outside the religious radius have been explained Yogananda was able to do. For example, what does universal religion say about God? It says that the proof of the existence of God lies in ourselves; knowing or realising God is an inner experience. For this purpose, man has to go beyond the limits of pleasure and pains, little love and hate, and so on. So that the mind of man can be free to realise pure bliss and tranquillity that had welled up in the heart of man, then man can enjoy an unruffled state of mind.

The Need for the Universality of Religion

Yogananda does not explain to us many conceptions through traditions. However, he catches these concepts in concrete reality through scientific methods and not through traditional practices. Moreover, through his writing and major work, his autobiography emphasises the need for the universality of religion wherein no distinction of caste or creed, sect or faith dress or code, age or sex, profession or position have any role to play. In his opinion, all religious differences and the wars which have been fought based on religion can come to an end when man realises God and broadens the mind, which is possible not through historical experience of religious difference, linguistic barriers and cultural complexes but the true spirit of religion and God can be understood through scientific course experimented by Yogananda himself of *Kriyayoga* which he learnt through his great spiritual musters like saint Sri. Yukteswaraji, Yukteswarji's spiritual teacher Lahiri Mahasaya and Lahiri's great spiritual teacher Mahavatar Babaji. This has been a very good and very rare experience which only the luckiest man Yoganandaji got.

Mulkraj Ahuja's Appreciation

The prestigious and reputed globally known journals, magazines, newspapers, and even educational institutions have showered a very balanced appreciation of *An Autobiography of a Yogi*. *There has been nothing before written in English or any other European language like this presentation of Yoga*.³ The great testimony of Yoganand's greatness has been most precisely and admirably cited in the form of appreciation by Mulkraj Ahuja (Counsel General of India) in the following expression:

He brought to America from the country of his birth the serenity of soul and the understanding of human and spiritual values of life, which not only helped many a man high and low to obtain peace to mind in modern society but also helped in an understanding between the peoples of India and the U.S.A.

As an apostle of peace and a believer in the brotherhood of man, Yoganandaji devoted his life and all the energy and means he possessed to the cause of understanding and friendship between the East and the West. To him, India and the U.S.A. were not two separate countries but the two parts of one single plan for the development in the harmony of man's material and spiritual values.⁴

Real Religion Lies in Understanding God's Presence

Yogananda's writings and speeches have helped humankind understand religion, mediation, and God's realisation in a very proper spirit. Religion, as has been understood by the people, is in the narrow sense. People suppose that religion is a mere formality. However, this is not the real definition of religion. Real religion lies in understanding God's presence through every action of man. Yoganandaji emphasised that God can be realised through every activity of man, including daily routine experiences, and that presence of God can be felt even in the minutest object of this universe. The creation reflects the creator. Man is powerless to create even an atom or a single grain of wheat or rice. Therefore, one has to realise that behind every creation, there is the creator.

Self-Realisation Fellowship

Many people have understood God in different ways. Some have taken God as personal others understood God as impersonal. However, God has to be understood only through the scientific method, which has been practised and experimented with through *Krivayoga* by this great Yogi. This is a scientific method. This classical book, *An Autobiography of a Yogi*, is written by Paramhansa Yogananda, the great Yogi of our times who established the centres of Meditation and Yoga practices of the Self-Realisation Fellowship in Los Angeles. These practices and experiments have greatly influenced modern Hinduism. In the history of mysticism, spirituality and religion, Paramhansa Yoganandaji occupies a unique position. In this autobiography, we find accounts of remarkable healings being displayed to us.

The Wondrous Feats Performed by Yogis and Fakirs

The book presents to us wondrous feats performed by Yogis and Fakirs, revealing wonderful deeds like extrasensory perception, levitation and bi-locality positions. For example, Mukunda, by then (Yogananda) in his childhood days visits the Saints who were known as perfume saint was performing his aromatic miracles. Instead of being impressed, Mukunda questions why he would spend so many years obtaining power for astral of the stars perfume when he could easily buy it. On this occasion, Mukunda is surprised to note that why anyone should try to prove God in such away. Such things never attracted this great saint Paramhansa Yogananda right from the days of his initial stages of God's realisation.

To comprehend the immensity of the Almighty, it is beyond the capacity of man as Yoganandaji explains this incapacity of man to understand the infinite God. In this respect, Yoganandaji says:

A small cup cannot be responsible for the vast waters of an ocean, so the limited human mind cannot contain the universal Christ Consciousness. However, when by meditation, one continues to enlarge his mind, he finally attains omniscience. He becomes the Divine Intelligence that permeates the atoms of creation.⁵

Methods of Meditation

Therefore, this great Yogi has given us the formula, methods of meditation in which the role of *Kriyayoga* is most dominant. However, it helps enlarge human consciousness to enable the human mind to realise ultimate reality. The technique of meditation is not cited in the traditional routine methods of meditation but through *Kriyayoga*. The *Kriyayoga* needs to union with the soul. *Kriyayoga* attempt to create a robust approach to self-discovery and spiritual enlightenment. Kriya is a gentle, skilful, balanced approach to life. It is an attempt and a way of conscious and creative living.

Kriyayoga teaches man that God is discovered in his own body first. For this purpose, devotion is the first need where the body becomes unimportant except that it can separate itself by way of making your soul vibrant with this realisation. The destiny of the body is wholly unimportant to a man of God-realization. In this respect, the personal utterance of Yoganandaji is the most valuable comments for the entire humanity. He endorses his personal enlightened super experience of *Kriyayoga* in the following manner:

I have never known any pleasure of the world as great as the spiritual joy of *Kriyayoga*. I would not give it up for all the comforts of the west or all the gold in the world. I have found, if possible, through *Kriyayoga* to carry my happiness always with me.⁶

However, the prerequisite to practising *Kriyayoga*, the devotees of this, should reach the safety of as has been explained by Yoganandaji. One becomes just like a kid without anger, without attachment, full of life and joy in the spiritual life. Let nothing hurt or disturb you. Be still within, receptive to the Divine Voice. Spend your leisure time in meditation. Meditation is central, and this can be done through *Kriyayoga*.

Yoganandaji's Conception of God

People understand God at different levels. Some think God is personal others think Him impersonal, and many men say that Almighty is Omnipresent and Omnipotent. Nevertheless, Yogananda says that this is unnecessary and simply saying this man can not realise God. These are stereotyped expressions that cannot enable man to realise the man.

The hint which this great Yogi gives us to realise God is to feel. His presence in every trivial experience and the tiniest object. Suppose God does not influence our daily conduct if our daily and everyday life experience does not find inspiration from Him. Then that conception is useless. This great Yogi Yoganandji, in a very simple manner, explain to us the concept of God:

If God is not conceived in such a way that we cannot do without him in the satisfaction of want in our dealings with people, in earning money, in reading a book, in passing an examination, in the doing of the most trifling or the highest duties, then it is plain that we have not felt any connection between God and life.⁷

People call God infinite, Almighty, Omnipresent; by doing this, they explain him but do not make us see Him. So to understand God is necessary than calling him Omnipotent. What we consider of God should be of daily even hourly guidance to us. He says: '*The very conception of God should stir us to seek Him amid our daily lives.*'⁸

When God is One, Why There Are So Many Religions

After giving a satisfactory explanation of *The Science of Religion*, Yoganandaji emphasises the universality of religion, which means that the root of religions is one though the approaches may be different. He asked himself one basic question: when God is one, why there are so many religions. This question is very logical, and it can occur to any individual. In its answer, Yoganandaji gives us the reason that:

It may be argued that particular stages of intellectual growth and special types of mentality belonging to certain nations, owing to different geographical locations and other extraneous circumstances, determine the origin of different religions such as Hinduism, Mohammedanism, and Buddhism Asiatic Christianity for the western and so forth.⁹

So our primary approach to realise God rather than he engaged in following in different tenets and dogmas and God-consciousness should be dominant both within and without us. There is but only one religion in the world, for there is but one God. Therefore, Yoganandaji paid enough attention to the universality, necessity and oneness of religion. He gives a psychological definition based on dogmas and tenets. Through his writings, lectures, discussions, this great Yogi has sought to make religion a question of our whole inward being and attitude. He does not appreciate a mere observance of certain rules and perceptions. In this respect, Yoganandaji defines religion: '*religion necessarily consists of permanent removal of pain and the realisation of Bliss, or God.*'¹⁰

So the chief purpose of religion is to keep man away from pain and to offer him bliss. The basic question discussed by him is that men make efforts to avoid pain. But by doing this,

they are only running after pleasure. But this is not the same as bliss. The aim of man should be to obtain bliss and to do this, and man has to realise God and his infinite mercy. If man attains this state of feeling, he goes beyond the sense of pain, and pleasure is bliss. This can be achieved only by understanding vision in a broader perspective, and therefore, he has taken enough care to see that oneness and unity of religion are necessary for achieving this state of mind. Indian rishis, maharishis and Saints have gone ahead through established practices of meditation and *Kriyayoga*.

A Practical Way Out

As a solution, how can we make religion workable truth because there are many religions, and how can they be brought under a single banner. Therefore, a practical way out is worked out by Yoganandaji. He advocates that every religion posses at least some good virtues, though all religions have embraced what is good in themselves. But due to dogmas, narrow religious practices mixed with cultured practice and geographical and historical differences started following different principles and practices. However, there is enough space to choose whatever good qualities we find in all religions without denying our religion. By this approach, rivalry and bitterness between religions are reduced, and suitable compromising understanding is developed, and this is surely possible, and it is the only way out from the fabric of modern life.

Yoganandaji's Estimation of Different Heads of Religion

Yoganandaji immensely gifted mind, a well-read scholar and inborn genius, has digested the spirit of all religions. This becomes clear when we know Yoganandaji's estimation of different religions like Moses, Lord Christ, Lord Buddha, Prophet Mohammad Sri. Yukteswar, Krishna:

O Christ, beloved son of God; thou didst embark on a storm-tossed sea of a prejudiced mind. Their evil thought wave-lashed my tender heart.
Thy trial on the Cross was an immortal victory of humility over the force of soul over the flesh. May thine ineffable example hearten us to bear bravely our lesser crosses.¹¹

Yoganandaji has estimated Moses about whom he says:

O Moses, Paragon of prophets! thou dost lead weary ones from the wilderness of sorrow of the promised land flowing with milk and honey...
O Monotheistic Moses, Moses teach us to worship wholeheartedly the one God, the sole Ruler of heaven and earth – and no other God. Then shall it be said of us, as of thee: "Lord Spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend."¹²

Regarding Lord Buddha, the symbol of wisdom, Yoganandaji says: ‘Thou symbol of sympathy, Incarnation of compassion, give us thy determination that with an urgency we, too, pursue Truth. Teach us to seek the Sovereign Remedy, as Thou didst, for the ills of mankind’.¹³

Regarding Prophet Mohammad, Yoganandaji says: ‘O Mohammed, to the war-drum beat of *Allah-o-Akbar* ('God is the Greatest'), drive away from us the Satan matter worship. With that sacred battle cry, may we rout all invading thoughts of fear and limitations’.¹⁴

Conclusion

One can come to know the approach of Yoganandaji in respect of God-consciousness in answer to a question by a devotee: ‘Sir, I do not seem to be progressing in my meditations. I see and hear nothing a student said’¹⁵ The master replied: ‘Seek God for His own sake. The highest perception is to feel Him as Bliss, welling up from your infinite depth. Do not yearn for visions, spiritual phenomena, or thrilling experiences. The path to the Divine is not a circus’.¹⁶

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