

Reason & Religion

M. RAM MURTY

At the dawn of human history, we see that astrology, alchemy and the magic of the medicine man were integral parts of the early civilizations. Though mingled with superstition and stupidity, these fields of human activity discovered some fundamental truths. When we applied the scientific method to each of these fields, we obtained a pure discipline. The sciences of astronomy, chemistry and medicine emerged and humanity was able to advance further. Moreover, these disciplines are not the property of any particular race or culture but belong to the whole of humanity. Today, we stand at a similar juncture in human destiny with respect to religion, and religion awaits for the application of the scientific method.

In a remarkable lecture¹ entitled “Reason and Religion” delivered in England, Swami Vivekananda advocated the application of the scientific method to the field of religion and the sooner this is done, the better. In fact, as we witness the state of global affairs, the survival of the human race depends upon it.

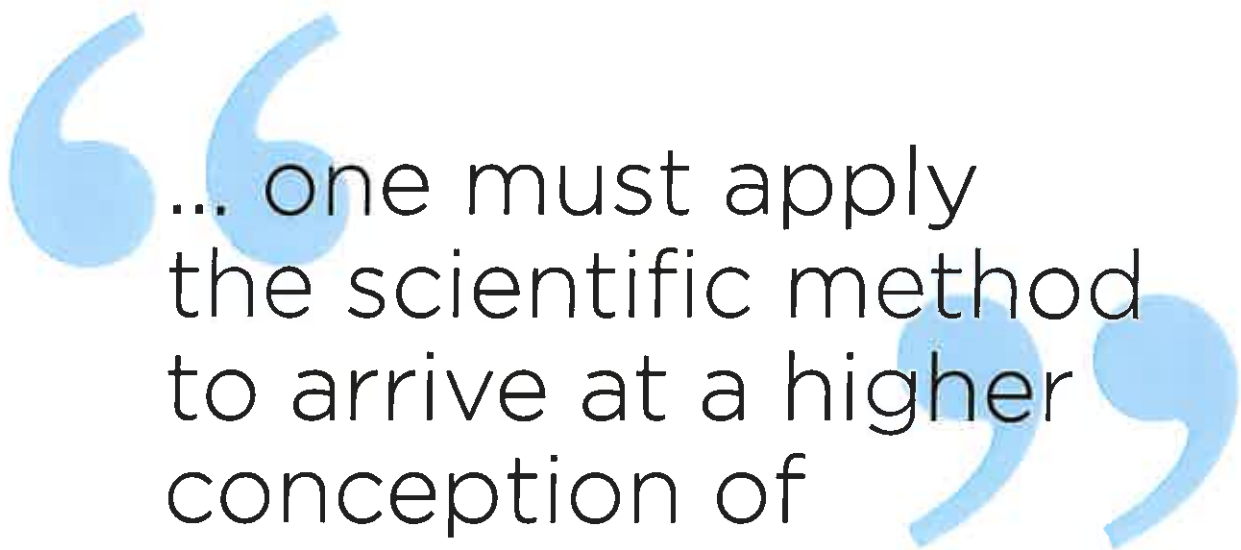
In his essay, Vivekananda asks, “Is religion to justify itself by the discoveries of reason through which every other science justifies itself? Are the same methods of investigation which we apply to science and knowledge outside, to be applied to the science of religion? In my opinion this must be so, and I am also of the opinion that the sooner it is done the better. If a religion is destroyed by such investigations, it was then all the time useless, unworthy superstition; and the sooner it goes, the better. I am thoroughly convinced that its destruction would be the best thing that could happen. All that is dross will be taken off, no doubt, but the essential parts of religion will emerge triumphant out of this investigation.”²

And what is the scientific method? How do we apply it in the field of religion? The main tools of the scientific method are careful observations and objectivity. Out of these observations we seek for an explanation applying the method of deductive logic and

reason. “The first principle of reasoning is that the particular is explained by the general, the general by the more general, until we come to the universal,” writes Vivekananda.³ The second principle of science is the search for universal laws arising from the inherent nature of matter and energy that would explain the observed phenomenon. Vivekananda explains this as follows. “The explanation of a thing must come from inside and not outside. There had been the belief that, when a man threw up a stone and it fell, some demon dragged it down. Many occurrences which are really natural phenomena are attributed by people to unnatural beings. That a ghost dragged down the stone was an explanation from outside; but the second explanation of gravitation is something in the nature of the stone; the explanation is coming from inside.”⁴ Expanding on this, he wrote, “What is meant by science is that the explanations of things are in their own nature and that no external beings or existences are required to explain what is going on in the universe.”⁵

In his polemic book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins documents the horrific episodes of human history that occurred in the name of religion. At the same time, he acknowledges that some of the greatest scientists we have known were deeply religious, but not in the conventional sense of the term. In his opening chapter, “A deeply religious non-believer” he presents Einstein as the prototype of such a scientist. Indeed, it is so. Einstein is often quoted as saying “Science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind.”⁶ Dawkins points out correctly that this is frequently used to align Einstein with traditional views of religion. In fact, Einstein often tried to correct these misrepresentations. He wrote, “I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.”⁷

Amplifying on this quotation and underlining the focus of his



... one must apply
the scientific method
to arrive at a higher
conception of
religion.

attack, Dawkins writes, "By 'religion' Einstein meant something entirely different from what is conventionally meant. As I continue to clarify the distinction between supernatural religion on the one hand and Einsteinian religion on the other, bear in mind that I am calling only supernatural gods delusional."⁸ Critics of Dawkins usually miss this point.

This distinction is equivalent to Vivekananda's rejection of the demon theory in science. It is the rejection of the extra-cosmic God who surveys humanity, punishing the wicked and rewarding the good. It is a rejection of this conventional view of religion that a large portion of humanity still tenaciously holds. But at the same time, each religious tradition has produced great personalities who taught universal values of love and compassion. So what we need to do is to apply the scientific method to religion and out of that will emerge a 'universal religion' based upon observation and experience. Can we arrive at such a 'scientific religion'? That is, can we derive a religion that meets the two requirements of science delineated above?

Science, no doubt, derives its power from observations and objectivity. The observations are classified and organized and out of that emerges knowledge. This knowledge does not arise out of the blue. It is the quintessence of the scientist's patient observations and experience filtered through the crucible of reason. In this, the scientist experiences an epiphany, a cosmic religious feeling. In his essay, "Religion and Science", Einstein underscores this idea. "I maintain that the cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research. Only those who realize the immense efforts and above all, the devotion without which pioneer work in theoretical science cannot be achieved are able to grasp the strength of the emotion out of which alone such work, remote as it is from the immediate realities of life, can issue. What a deep conviction of the rationality of the universe and what a yearning to understand ... Kepler and Newton must have had to enable them to spend years of solitary labour in disentangling the

principles of celestial mechanics. ... Only one who has devoted his life to similar ends can have a vivid realization of what inspired these men and given them the strength to remain true to their purpose in spite of countless failures. It is cosmic religious feeling that gives a man such strength. A contemporary has said, not unjustly, that in this materialistic age of ours the serious scientific workers are the only profoundly religious people."⁹

It is clear that religion, in the conventional sense of the term, developed historically as first emerging out of fear. Einstein outlines its evolution as follows. "With primitive man it is above all fear that evokes religious notions - fear of hunger, wild beasts, sickness, death. Since at this stage of existence understanding of causal connections is usually poorly developed, the human mind creates illusory beings more or less analogous to itself on whose wills and actions these fearful happenings depend."¹⁰ Slowly, impelled by social necessity, this developed into a moral religion, since people have to live together and work together. Elaborating on this idea, Einstein continues, "The Jewish scriptures admirably illustrate the development from the religion of fear to moral religion, a development continued in the New Testament. The religions of all civilized people, especially the peoples of the Orient, are primarily moral religions. The development from a religion of fear to moral religion is a great step ... Common to all these types is the anthropomorphic character of their conception of God."¹¹

But in order to go beyond this stage, one must apply the scientific method to arrive at a higher conception of religion. This requires the development of reason. Humanity now stands at an important evolutionary juncture in its development of the reasoning faculty. The scientific method, based on reason and experiment has been our only instrument of knowledge. But knowledge, Vivekananda insists, is based on experience. We must experience these facts for ourselves and not rely on other's testimony. Real religion is not a matter of faith and belief but rather a matter of experience and realization. Highlighting this idea,

Vivekananda wrote, "Experience is the only source of knowledge. In the world, religion is the only science where there is no surety, because it is not taught as a science of experience. This should not be. There is always a small group of men who teach religion from experience. They are called mystics and these mystics in every religion speak the same tongue and teach the same truth. This is the real science of religion. As mathematics in every part of the world does not differ, so the mystics do not differ ... Their experience is the same."¹²

Einstein echoes this idea when he writes, "The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling, which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man's image. ... How can cosmic religious feeling be communicated from one person to another if it can give rise to no definite notion of God and no theology? In my view, it is the most important function of art and science to awaken this feeling and keep it alive in those who are receptive to it."¹³

Thus, the 'cosmic religious feeling' Einstein describes is a matter of personal experience that motivates the scientist to probe further and discover new things. The 'God' of the scientist, if one can use that term, is an 'Impersonal God' and not an extra-cosmic deity. The Impersonal is revealed in the hidden structure of nature, both without and within. It is the seen and it is the act of seeing too.

Thus, the thesis of the Personal God stands in opposition to the antithesis of the Impersonal, posited from the standpoint of scientific reason. But both of these can be fused into a synthesis from the advaitic perspective (philosophy of non-dualism) which meets the criterion of generalization indicated earlier. This is Vivekananda's main contribution.

What is the result of viewing world religions from the perspective of the Impersonal? Vivekananda answers, "Will religion stand as a factor in human life, our consoler, our helper? What becomes of the human heart to pray for help to some being? That will all remain. The Personal God will remain, but on a better basis. He has been strengthened by the Impersonal. We have seen that without the Impersonal, the Personal cannot remain. If you mean to say there is a Being entirely separate from this universe, who has created this universe just by His will, out of nothing, that cannot be proved. Such a state of things cannot be. But if we understand the idea of the Impersonal, then the idea of the Personal can remain there. The universe, in its various forms, is but the various readings of the same Impersonal. When we read it with the five senses, we call it the material world. If there be a being with more senses than five, he will read it as something else. If one of us gets the electric sense, he will see the universe as something else again. There are various forms of that same Oneness of which all these various ideas of worlds are but various readings and the Personal God is the highest reading that can be attained of that Impersonal, by the human intellect."¹⁴

In summary, humanity stands today at a critical point since

religious conflicts (further fuelled by political conflicts) are on the rise. These are rooted in age-old dogmatic views that have no corroboration in reality and when subjected to scientific reason, these views fall apart. Vivekananda was the first person to emphasize that the scientific principle of generalization, understood properly, will resolve this conflict. The Impersonal will explain the Personal God and from this perspective, one achieves a grander unity, not only among world religions, but also the sciences and the humanities and all domains of creative endeavour.

M. Ram Murty • Department of Mathematics and Statistics, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, K7L 3N6, Canada • murty@math.queensu.ca

REFERENCES

- ¹ Delivered in the evening of November 18, 1896 at 39 Victoria Street, London, England according to the Vivekananda Chronology which can be found at: <http://vedanta.org/vs/wpcontent/uploads/2012/07/chronology2.pdf>
- ² Swami Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 1, p. 367.
- ³ Ibid., p. 369.
- ⁴ Ibid., p. 370.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 371.
- ⁶ Science, Philosophy and Religion, A Symposium, 1941.
- ⁷ R. Dawkins, The God Delusion, p. 36.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 36.
- ⁹ A. Einstein, The World as I see it, Philosophical Library, New York, 1949, p. 28.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 24.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 25.
- ¹² Swami Vivekananda, Complete Works, Volume 6, p. 81.
- ¹³ A. Einstein, The World as I see it, Philosophical Library, New York, 1949, p. 25.
- ¹⁴ Swami Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 1, p. 377.