

# Role of Religion and Spirituality in Civilizing Human Society: A Contemporary Perspective

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[This paper forms a part of the research project."A Study of Walt Whitman's Socio-spiritual and Mystical Concerns and their relevance to the biorhythm of post post-modern Indian society".]

## ABSTRACT:

*This research papers seeks to highlight the humanistic elements in the mystical voyage of Walt Whitman and relating to the same to Indian conditions in the post postmodern era. The world in which Walt Whitman lived, and the world we inhabit today, are no doubt different, yet, essentially, there is no difference. Differences are illusory. His world and our world, both suffer from the same fundamental inadequacies. The difference lies in how the mystic approaches these inadequacies. Is he content to simply contemplate on them or he takes an active lead, and shows to the people a way out of*

*their limited existence, characterized by parochialism, discrimination, hatred and divisions. His philosophy of a unified living can be found echoing in the various religious outfits which are operating in India. The basic thrust is to touch the biorhythm of society. Mere theorizing is half the truth. Thought alone is not enough. One has to be practitioner of his ideas. Whitman never faltered in living out his philosophy. His mystical stance was a close run up to the societal living. Religions in India too, like Sikhism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, etc. have aimed at refining the human stuff. But how much they have succeeded can be seen from the fire of hatred, jealousy, discrimination, that is engulfing the world all around, particularly in Muslim countries. Apart from this, even in normal living, life has become deeply and horizontally corrupted, and man has lost the shine of the divine. The purpose of this research paper is to focus on how Walt Whitman and his spiritual doctrine can help in bringing about a balance in human living.*

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## RELIGION: A HUMAN BEING'S MAIN STAY

Every soul born to this earth, immediately upon its emergence here, acquires a religion, wanted or unwanted. It is the religion of its parents. And, thereafter, there is no chance of ever changing over to any other religion. There is also no question of any freedom in converting to the religion of one's choice. As the child grows into the man, he is always in the throes of a chauvinistic passion: my religion is the best. Up to that point, there is nothing wrong. However, when another dimension is added to it: that it is better than yours, and you must convert to my religion, the problems sets in, leading to forced conversions, riots, hatred, incidents of arson, and killing of innocents, all such things are the stock in trade when religion flares up into communal frenzy. It is spirituality which sedates the worked up human nerves.

Apart from communalism, which can be best described as a distortion of a religious philosophy, society is plagued by various social evils which afflict the larger mass of society. In the Indian setting, people are leading frustrated lives because of several problems, which include a hyper passion for prosperity, power, wealth and knowledge. The Faustian lusts which had once tempted Dr. Faustus, are still at large, and are affecting human nerves. A closer look (even a distant look would not deny it) shows how Indian society is torn by conflicts born out of castes, creeds, communalism, and constant flare ups because of religious politics being played in

the country. An average man is a bundle of biases and, add to it, the cruel economic forces, which dehumanize ordinary human beings, and turn them into corrupted cells of a broken societal system.

## EFFECT ON BIORHYTHM OF SOCIETY

The current proclivities prevalent among the masses have disturbed the even flow of life. The past looks glorious because it is out of our reach now. The slow pace of life provided a lot of opportunities to lead this life with poise and peace. But, the speed of the post modern society has disturbed the even movement of the human mind. Man, who controlled time, is now a fool of it. It is often said: care killed the cat. Here is our man, who is now massacred by cares. And time, its high consciousness, coupled with speed, have united to turn life into a confusion of fast movements. Life can be compared to the zig zag scene of railway lines at a railway station. Who knows how from this confusion two rails would emerge to let the train carry itself off over them! Same is the case with our world. Society is ridden with so many potholes, nothing can acquire an even gait. Right from getting a seat for the child in a convent school, to set him off on the journey of life, his education, his marriage, his children, and the problems relating to man and wife, and generation gap which keeps children and their parents away from each others, -- all these developments of a modern society, characterized by broken homes, single parent families, men afflicted with alienation, isolation, and apathy of children at home, and society at large, -- all these happenings have disturbed

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the biorhythm of society and created a psychological chaos which is not easy to surmount.

### THE EFFECTS OF DISTURBED BIORHYTHM OF SOCIETY

It is not difficult to compare the society of Walt Whitman and our society today. He came at the very beginning of the new world of technology, and we are now in thick of this world of technology marked by electronic advances. The disruption on the social system is the result of over heated mindsets, working beyond their capacity, and in the direction they are not accustomed to. Why is there friction? When two opposing forces come together, there is friction. What are these opposing forces? Not necessarily the parents and their children, or the workers and their employers, but more so, it is man's inside, his psyche which is under attack. He is unable to decide. He is unable to take one path. He is torn among so many choices. With the end result that he is neither this, nor that, but a masterless every thing. This unbecoming that he faces, he loses his identity as one man, he loses his profession as one professional, he loses his one woman, as the sole arbiter in the home, -- this lose of the singular position has caused fissures in his psyche. He has a single body, but a divided mind. When ideas are flying in all the directions, it is not the situation of a whole being; it is a fragmented existence, an anti-existence, something which is not death, but not even life too.

It is shocking to see the consequent results of this disturbed biorhythm. The major effect is crime. Crime has become so rampant that it appears to be a normal activity with human beings. It has lost its shock element. Politics is often said to be the last refuge of a scoundrel. But religion these days has lost its high pedestal. Both have corrupted each other and society is now between these two opposing forces: religion trying to spread wisdom and sanity and politics counteracting it with madness and insanity. Every politicians, whether in or out of power, is a mad house production. This was helpful in maintaining a balance in the biorhythm of society. But, when these two forces start flowing together, in the same direction, only hell can be the ultimate destination. It is not difficult to see what is happening in our society. Rapes, abductions, killings, desertions, divorces, univorges, [people living under the same roof, but without any conjugal relations] live-ins, live-outs, straining of marital bonds, and all the extra-[marital]-vaganza point to a society with badly disturbed nerves, whose no body part is functioning properly. When such a condition afflicts human body, it is called paralysis.

### RELIGIONS AND THEIR LOSING GRIP ON HUMANITY:

No doubt, there is a religious revival in the world. It can be seen as a religious renaissance. Looking at the Indian scene, one can find Yogis like Baba Ramdev, Sathya Sai Baba, Dera Sacha Sauda, Asa Ram Bapu etc. trying to catapult the society into a religiously active society. One can

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only forget to his peril, what serials like Mahabharata and Ramayana did to the Indian population. Religion is the umbilical chord which binds man to his divinity. But, in spite of the religious renaissance, Indian society is hardly free from crime. Are we really very soft with evil? In India, rapes are an every day affair, and even godmen are some times found indicted of such crimes. Such happenings strain all logic and force man to think that religion is a waste of time in which people indulge as a pastime.

Apart from moral crimes, there is a whole list of sections in the Indian Penal Code which deal with various crimes. When a teacher does not teach in the classes, when a student does not attend classes, when a salesman tells lies beyond his genuine ten percent, when corporate bribe governments, all these things are happening with impunity. Still, the surprise of surprises is that these people are found visiting shrines, paying obsequies, and distributing organized alms to socially deprived groups. This is our social structure and it is a distortion of a society, a shadow society, the real underworld of which we are willing or unwilling stakeholders.

#### THE CHALLENGE BEFORE RELIGION

The challenge before religion is not to provide immunity to these people who pay hefty offerings at the shrines, or to protect those in seats of power who are misusing their powers, but to offer them an alternative way of life. It is here that Walt Whitman's concepts of a living based on freedom and a being without any bounds,

comes in. It is here that the practical living is required, instead of theoretical chanting of mantras in the shrines. Reading the scriptures is half the job, but unfortunately we are told that if you do this five or ten times, or forty times, your problems will be over. So, instead of action, we are expected only to just go on reading scriptures. Reading scriptures does not help. Scriptures are meant to make us understand certain truths and certain values. But, we think that a routine chanting of them will pull us closer to the Great One. It is a misconception. The truly religious man must move beyond his scriptural studies, and come into the open field, the work field, where he must actuate the verses and their message he has read. Here, practically, most of the religions, in most of the cases, fail. Because, practical training is nil. And, books do not go far. Rosaries fall apart. What really helps mankind is man's selfless work in society, and this is the thing which ultimately helps him transcend himself, expand beyond barriers, and become a soul, defying all definitions.

The real challenge before religion is the dehumanizing economic forces, the derailed mindset of human kind, and lack of faith in God. Knowledge which divides is infernal, and knowledge which unites, is divine. Religions also claim to impart knowledge. But, that knowledge is only about dividing society vertically. Except Hindu India and the Christian countries, the world is at loggerheads, and there is the reign of executions and persecutions in the Arab world. Religion has suffered a setback

because of its being reduced to ritualization alone. Too much symbolization of religion has also resulted in lack of content, lack of faith, and lack of decency in the lives of the people. Time has come when religion has to impart knowledge which believes in giving, surrender, and self abnegation. So that there is a positive energy in the society and people start loving each other, rather than distrusting and hating one another.

The para-religions of today which are impacting the lives of millions across the world have shown a way out of this mess. They have gone beyond the dividing lines of religions, and tried to implant among the people love for each other, and a spirit of service for mankind. Brahma Kumaris, Arya Samaj, Art of Living, and even Osho, all these philosophies are aimed at going beyond existing religious codes, and developing a new ethics of living. Osho wanted a new man to take the place of the warped psychology of the old man. Arya Samaj believes in having 'pure' human beings. Art of Living Foundation's 'Sudarshan Kirya' has changed the lives of millions. So has the Brahma Kumaris spread the spiritual message of a clean living, away of social ills, and a life dedicated not only to meditation, but also to a better personal life, a stress free life, and its social orientation.

These outfits have gone a long way in effecting a change in the outlook of the people. Dera Sacha Sauda has instilled in the people a will to keep away from alcohol and drugs. It has saved millions of homes from further poverty and homely squabbles, in addition to giving to the families an assured

income which was wasted on bottles. These para-religious organizations have left deep ripples on the waters of society, and disturbed its march into materialism. They have tried to bring man back to his rails, and re-orient him in the service of mankind. This is what Walt Whitman had been doing. His message is the message of love. He wants to break through the walls. He wants to remove the doors and then, also remove the jambs from the doors. So that there is no obstruction in the flow of life. So that all the contradictions that are visible are resolved in an expansion of the spirit.

#### RELEVANCE OF WALT WHITMAN'S MYSTICAL TOOLS:

Walt Whitman had a powerful realization that human mind has to be cleansed of oily stuff of attachment and self love. This love, of the self, had to be converted into the love for the non-self. He perceived the world as a Commonwealth of Human Wealth. He wanted that all the resources of the world should be shared like sun and winds, so that there is no one born poor. He believed in equitable distribution of world's wealth. For him, sex was as religious an act as any thing else. Because, it led to procreation. It can easily be seen in his works that he makes almost no reference of a Guru in his writings to achieve communion with God. He believed that a man, with an awakened soul, could see into the life of things, and he would be able to see God playing hide and seek everywhere. His 'Leaves of Grass' signifies humanity and its equality, as well as unity at the same time, and its divine connect. He is afraid of

the jamming paraphernalia of religions, which block the growth of human vision and affections. He wanted man to be in a state of flow; flowing out of himself, and into his fellow men, as well as birds, beasts and rivers and mountains, and skies.

Such a philosophy of liberation, personal freedom, joy, peace and prosperity which Walt Whitman preached, is the need of the hour. Because, this is the time when human beings are caught in a vortex of self love, self promotion, and the consequences are not far to be seen. There is division, fighting, killings, distrust, inequality in the world of man. The various para-religions mentioned above have tried their bit to bring down the frayed tempers yet the obvious results are from flattering.

Walt Whitman who believed in temperance, denied that any faith was more important than another, and embraced all religions equally. In 'Song of Myself', he gave an inventory of major religions and indicated that he respected and accepted all of them – a sentiment he further emphasized in his poem "With Antecedents", affirming "I adopt each theory, myth, god and demi-god, I see that the old accounts, bibles, genealogies, are true, without exception." Whitman's influence on America had been so vast that his critic Harold Bloom wrote, as the introduction for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 'Leaves of Grass':

"If you are American, then Walt Whitman is your imaginative father and mother, even if, like myself, you have never composed a line of verse. "

Walt Whitman believes in Love, Compassion, humility, honest work, and loving the body as well as the mind, and in the expansion of the self from a selfish self to a selfless self or non-self which includes the whole cosmos. Like other mystics, his philosophy is not the philosophy of a self-centered saint, but of a manly saint, whose revelations of the God send him back to his humanity and he is inspired with the vision of a new man. We can witness in him a overwhelming passion for reform, and his strong opposition to the cannons of established religion which excelled in causing divisions. He realizes that world is a commonwealth of spirituality and here, there should be a common agenda for the common welfare of mankind, and there should be no digressions, and no conflicts, there should be peace in the empire of the Lord.

"Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons,

It is to grow in the open air, and to eat and sleep

With the earth. " ['Leaves of Grass' p. 110]

Religion has lost its mass appeal because of its lack of orientation with the people. The talk of guns is on the rise. Identity is becoming a point of exploitation, as well as control. Politicization of religion, and its affair with power,

are negative developments. If religion is to play its role in preparing mankind for the hereafter, they have to prepare them well for the here too, and in this job, spirituality can be the best answer.

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