

## TWENTIETH CENTURY WESTERN FAITHLESSNESS VS SRI AUROBINDO'S FAITH

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### ABSTRACT

The advent of the Twentieth Century witnessed drastic changes in all walks of life and particularly in religion. The old order of beliefs and values gave its place to the new ideas. It was a period when religious and moral values were pushed to the background. The focus shifted from God being the centre of the universe to a desperate pursuit of materialistic and worldly concerns which sublimated man's spiritual and religious values. Aurobindo, a great visionary and philosopher, saw the tragedy behind the physical and material landscape. He sets out to explore the human destiny by creating a spiritual consciousness in man. What he tries to propagate through his poetry is that man is not a mere speck in the universe; not a product of chance. He is part of a cosmic plan. His existence on this earth has a potential and a potent meaning. Aurobindo tries to cultivate the spiritual wasteland of man through faith in God. In the present paper, 'faith' is taken in context of the first half of the Twentieth Century; the period when doubt dominated faith and Aurobindo through his poetry tries to work back to man's faith in God.

**Keywords:** Faith, science, doubt, consciousness, hope, spirituality

## INTRODUCTION:

Encyclopaedia Britannica defines 'faith' as, "A religious term for an inner attitude, conviction, or trust relating man to a supreme God or ultimate salvation. In religious traditions stressing divine grace, it is the devotee's inner certainty or attitude of love granted by God himself." (EB, "faith") Faith is a practical commitment beyond evidence to one's self that God exists; the inherent confidence or trust in the truth even when it does not manifest itself. Faith is a precondition for that knowledge that is beyond simple human understanding of mind and sense perception. In Christianity, it is "divinely inspired human response to God's historical revelation through Jesus Christ and consequently, is of crucial significance." (EB, "faith") Faith is defined in the Bible (Hebrews 11:1) as "the assurance of the things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Dr. Radhakrishnan while defining 'faith' (*shraddha*), quotes Wesley: "It is the vision of the soul, that power by which spiritual things are apprehended, just as material things are apprehended by physical senses." (Radhakrishnan 1927, 4)

Faith lasts even when there is no fixed belief in the mind, even when the vital struggles, revolts and refuses to move forward. The fundamental faith of all religions is that the human beings with the grace of God will ultimately attain deliverance. So long as one has that faith, he is marked for spiritual life in spite of all obstacles, denials, difficulties and he is marked out for success in spiritual life and will attain soul's ultimate goal in deliverance. But nothing can be achieved unless one takes the first step with faith.

Faith in the spiritual sense is not a mental belief which can waver and change. Just as the body can change and the soul remains the same, so can the mental belief change, but faith is ultimate. It is that certitude which does not depend on reasoning, this or that mental idea, on circumstances, on conditions, of the mind or the body. Faith makes an individual clings to a certain idea even when it is not fulfilled in life, even when the immediate facts or the persistent circumstances seem to be denying it. Keeping faith in Divine grace, one attains the deliverance.

In the Holy Bible, faith is the only approach to God. "For he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him. Without faith it is impossible to please Him." (Hebrews 11.6) Christian faith is simply the channel through which God's grace is received. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." (Ephesians 2:8) It is the hand that reaches out and receives the gift of His love. Faith manifests itself in devotion – one's communion with God and the fellowship of the church. Unless an individual is devoted, there can be no aspiration and surrender and hence no hope for deliverance.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY WESTERN FAITHLESSNESS:

The Twentieth Century was a period when man under the influence of science started doubting the existence of God. He started approaching everything from a critical point of view. Everything was tested on the touchstone of logic and reason. The ideas that failed on these parameters were dismissed as outdated and false. Religion, that is based on faith and not on logic also failed in its test of reasoning. Mankind was confused and doubtful regarding religion and the moral and ethical values of the daily life. Faith was shattered and had given way to doubt. The entire human civilisation was decomposing as it lacked conviction and direction. This was a period when man's faith in religion and spirituality was at its lowest ebb. It was not as if the faith declined overnight. The decomposition started much before the advent of the Twentieth Century. Complaining about the "flimsiness" of his own religious faith, Ruskin exclaimed: "If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses." (Abrams 2: 882) The damage lamented by Ruskin was of two kinds: First the scientific attitude of mind was applied towards the study of the Bible itself. Bible was treated not as a sacred document but as a mere text of history. The second kind of damage was effected by the view of man implicit in the discoveries of geology and astronomy. Geology by extending the history of earth backwards million of years, reduced the stature of man in time. Matthew Arnold, the famous Victorian poet, in his poem *The Dover Beach* underlined the decline of faith in human mind as a universal phenomenon. It was not something that was happening in Europe or England but all over the world:

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear  
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
 Retreating, to the breath  
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
 And naked shingles of the world. (Abrams 2: 1355)

The retreat of faith had removed the charms from the world as it snapped man's connection with the other world. Earth was now without any Divine charm and confusion was everywhere. Ideas regarding man's evolution shattered man's faith in religion further as man was now not the choicest of being, the pinnacle of creation whom God created in his own image. He was just an improved form of ape with greater thinking power. These ideas refuted The Bible and man's faith in its genuineness and authenticity was shattered. It was not only Darwin alone who gave a jolt to the established religion but many more scholars from various disciplines contributed to it. In a letter Lord Action said,

"For 200 years, from the times of Hobbes, unbelief has been making its way. Unbelief came to be founded on science, because about on half of the classic writing, of the creative thinking of the world was done by unbelievers. The influence that reigned were in great measure atheistic. No man could be reared except by aid of Grote, Mill, Austin, Darwin, Lewis, Huxley, Tyndall – to take England only." (Radhakrishnan 1967, 39)

The same point was again raised by Eliot many years later when he says, "The greater part of our reading matter is coming to be written by people who not only have no real belief (in a supernatural order) but are even ignorant of the fact that there are still people in the world so 'backward' or so eccentric as to continue to believe." (Eliot, 122)

Another very important event that jolted the humanity was the First World War. It had an unprecedented impact on human consciousness. It was the worst and the most brutal conflict that humanity had ever faced. The war not only affected the course of modern history but the magnitude of destruction injured the psyche and affected the outlook of man towards life. The war marked a change in the public and private life of the people. The spiritual and moral values were shaken. People were disillusioned and disheartened by the great war. The entire human civilisation was as if in a state of trauma. Aurobindo after the end of the First World War remarked:

"A great intellectual and moral bankruptcy, an immense emptiness and depression has succeeded to the delirium of massacre. This is indeed the most striking immediate after result of the war, the atmosphere of a world-wide disappointment and disillusionment and the failure of great hopes and ideals." (Aurobindo 1972, Vol.25, 668)

The life in Europe was not the same. People had experienced the greatest shock of their lives and it had its repercussions on the moral, ethical, religious, social and spiritual front. It had its impact not only in the political field but also in the social areas also. The agony that the war produced was unbearable and it led to the change in certain ideas of man that changed the whole outlook. The humanity was as if uprooted from its belief and faith in religion. Heavenly ideas and ideals crumbled under intense psychological crisis that emerged out of the disaster of war. It was as if blind forces were running the universe without any plan or goal.

Doubt and disbelief created a disturbance and disequilibrium in man and society. With the higher connection and meaning gone, man was just a wanderer on the face of the earth. For man who had been finding consolation and hope in religion and faith, it was difficult to live without religion in meaninglessness. As scientific way of life became more preferable to the religious ways, the change in the whole lifestyle of the people was on the cards. Humanity started progressing with an attitude of inquiry towards everything. All the established traditions and customs were questioned and this attitude of inquiry became the spirit of the age. It refused to accept anything without any genuine proof. Religion that works not on the principles of interrogation and verification but on the ideology of surrender to the authority of God was declared as outdated. This outlook made the common man of Europe more adventurous and he started believing more in his own emotions and impulses. He was drawn more towards the materialistic pursuits rather than the spiritual and religious values. Man became a rebel that revolted against the constraints of the society and expressed his contempt for the contemporary standards because society's laws and rules of conduct often fettered the natural instincts of humanity. It was as if the European man had become an outsider to his own society.

## AUROBINDO's FAITH:

Aurobindo spent many years of his youth in England and was not unconscious of the changes that were taking place in the European civilisation. He was quite critical of the approach of science that had led to the decline of man's faith in God. Science had a very narrow approach and scope as it rejected everything that failed on the standards of logic. In his poem Science and the Unknowable, Aurobindo rejects the limited scientific viewpoint of looking at reality. It works on the physical level and is unable to look at the things that are beyond the physical level. Everything is not within the scientific domain as it has its own restricted scope. The supernatural realities cannot be understood by scientific knowledge but by spiritual consciousness:

Man's science builds abstractions cold and bare  
And carves to formulas the living whole;  
It is a brain and hand without a soul,  
A piercing eye behind our outward stare.  
The objects that we see are not their form,  
A mass of forces is the apparent shape;  
Pursued and seized, their inner lines escape  
In a vast consciousness beyond our norm. (CP, 598)

Aurobindo declares God as something beyond the explanation of science. God can only be achieved by faith and surrender and not by inquiry and logic. And faith is not founded on verification or knowledge. According to him, faith brings about the realisation and knowledge that is beyond ordinary human faculties. Aspiration towards God or to realize the invisible forces operating in the universe start with faith. It is beyond knowledge, intelligence and explanation. He understands faith as:

"...the conclusion formed after proof is not faith, it is knowledge or it is a mental opinion. Faith is something which one has before proof or knowledge and it helps you to arrive at knowledge and experience. There is no proof that God exists, but I have faith in God, then I can arrive at the experience of the Divine." (Aurobindo 1959, 89)

To call faith 'blind' is a rational description because it has no visible evidence of the thing aspired for. Faith is the realisation of the truth that is yet to be materialised. It is something that is not based on experience or proof but that which leads to the proof. It is an aspiration of merging into Truth and then emerging out with an experience and realisation. Aurobindo in his book 'Letters on Yoga' says:

"It is called blind by the sceptical intellect because it refuses to be guided by outer appearances or seeming facts, – for it looks for the truth behind, – and because it does not walk on the crutches of proof and evidence. It is an intuition; an intuition not only waiting for experience to justify it, but leading towards experience." (Aurobindo 1972, Vol. 22, 166)

Faith is not a belief in a dogma or a religion but it could be faith in one's own possibilities, the certitude that one negates all the difficulties, whatever the obstacles, whatever the imperfection, on his path and realizes the goal. It transcends dogmas and sectarianism. Faith requires strong will, sincere efforts, pure mind and unshakable belief to be followed by sincere aspiration, surrender of the physical, vital and mental being. Then one realizes his goal in a short period of time. According to Aurobindo:

"All men of action, discoverers, inventors, creators of knowledge proceed by faith and, until the proof is made or the thing done, they go on in spite of disappointment, failure, disproof, denial because of something in them that tells them that this is the truth, the thing that must be followed and done... The fundamental faith in yoga is this, inherent in the soul, that the Divine exists and the Divine is the one thing to be followed after – nothing else in life is worth having in comparison with that. So long as a man has that faith, he is marked for spiritual life and I will say that, even if his nature is full of obstacles and crammed with denials and difficulties, and even if he has many years of struggle, he is marked out for success in the spiritual life." (Aurobindo 1972, Vol. 23, 572-73)

What Aurobindo tried to propagate through his philosophy and poetry was that the world is a cosmos not a chaos. Human beings have a greater purpose to this life, they have a higher level of consciousness and spirituality which is meant to manifest some higher form of life. And life has a meaning in a context and a purpose that surpasses life. Only religion could provide the higher and the greater purpose. Contrary to the scientific approach that laid emphasis on this life only, religion and faith fitted life in a context that explained the pre- birth and afterlife mysteries. In the Twentieth Century man relied more on science and thereby rejected

religion. With the higher connection and meaning gone, man was just an outcome of evolutionary process like other animals. He was bound to feel lonely and disillusioned. Aurobindo through his philosophy and poetry tries to end the spiritual homelessness of man. He tries to develop a consciousness of God in human mind as an antidote to the fragmentation rampant in human psyche. He wanted humanity to look at the creation not from the material and worldly angle but from the spiritual and religious point of view. He in his poem Discoveries of Science III sets out to explore the human destiny as a part of larger cosmic order:

The visible has its roots in the unseen  
And each invisible hides what it can mean  
In a yet deeper invisible, unshown.  
The objects that you probe are not their form.  
Each is a mass of force thrown in shape.  
The forces caught, their inner lines escape  
In a fathomless consciousness beyond mind's norm.  
Probe it and you shall meet a Being still  
Infinite, nameless, mute, and unknowable. (CP 168)

Aurobindo differs from most of the Western philosophers who saw meaninglessness in the entire existence. Aurobindo tries to bring the world round to his views that the life on earth has a larger purpose. Man is just not a tiny speck in the whole cosmos. His existence on earth is not by chance but by the design of God. Behind formless is form and behind chance is design which the ordinary human mind fails to comprehend. There is a crisis in the consciousness of man that prevents him see and understand the real meaning of his life. To understand the true meaning of the entire creation, the horizon of man's understanding has to be pushed forward. It is the faith in the Divine, the supernatural, that can give significance to human life. Aurobindo says,

"Faith is a spiritual certitude of the spiritual, the divine, the soul's ideal, something that clings to that even when it is not fulfilled in life, even when the immediate facts or the persistent circumstances seem to deny it. This is a common experience in the life of the human being; if it were not so, man would be the plaything of a changing mind or a sport of circumstances." (Aurobindo 1972, Vol.23, 616)

It is the spiritual dimension of his own self that man has to comprehend. Science failed to see this dimension as it inquired only after the surface findings. It was successful in decoding the laws of nature but failed to understand the cosmic mysteries. This failure led them derive the meaninglessness in the existence of things and the relation of the creation with the beyond. What Aurobindo emphasises time and again is that unless man has a strong and firm faith in God, he will continue to be disillusioned by the insignificance that science has derived out of his life. Those who have faith are unmoved by this self created disorder of man.

Happy are they who in this chaos of things,  
This coming and going of the feet of Time,  
Can find the single Truth, the eternal Law:  
Untouched they live by hope and doubt and fear.  
Happy are men anchored on fixed belief  
In this uncertain and ambiguous world,  
Or who have planted in the heart's rich soil  
One small grain of spiritual certitude.

Happiest who stand on faith as on a rock. (Savitri, 499)

Aurobindo believed that the confusion that had been created by the Western philosophers was unreasonable. That had shattered the very basis of human civilisation. Those who were anchored in religion and faith were unaffected by any uncertainties created by the Western thinkers. They continued to move on the solid ground of faith, whereas those who paid any heed to those thinkers saw the ladder gone with the beyond. Berdyaev said: "Man stands amid a frightening emptiness. He no longer knows where the keystone of his life may be found; beneath his feet he feels no depth of solidity." (Berdyaev, 189)

It is with the search for a solid meaning on the firm ground of faith that the whole philosophy and poetry of Aurobindo deals. Without faith one is not tied to the centre where God is. The Twentieth Century saw emphasis on the centrifugal force where man moved away from God with a Faustian instinct. It is with the centripetal movement towards God with the spiritual consciousness that Aurobindo is concerned.

## CONCLUSION:

To conclude, one can say that Aurobindo departed from the views of the Western scholars who indulged in declaring mankind as the result of an evolutionary process without any spiritual dimension. These scholars were much too deeply influenced by the scientific reasoning. But Aurobindo had strong conviction in man's spirituality that founded in his unconditional faith in God. To him faith was the precondition for any progress towards realisation of the cosmic mysteries. Man cannot have the comprehensive understanding of the cosmic mysteries through mental awareness but through the spiritual consciousness. It was only through the spiritual consciousness that man can truly understand how the human life fits into the greater scheme of the creation which is ineffable to ordinary mind.

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