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## Religion as Quest for the Impossible

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**Muhammad Maroof Shah\***



One of the central problems in politically inflected religious revivalist movements including Islamist ones is inadequate theorization or understanding of the object and subject of religion due to marginalization or suspicion of/veto against philosophy, mysticism, art and advances in number of sciences including mythology, comparative religion and certain natural/social sciences. In general they have a) simplistic b) homogenizing c) literalist d) exclusivist e) ideologically framed reductionist understanding that can't withstand questioning from sciences while being vulnerable to many pathological deformations. Their standard reaction (as distinguished from response) to their critics which include mainstream traditional scholars, mystics, scientists, philosophers and artists is accusation

of in authenticity/Westoxication. They are more likely to judge, speak to, accuse, dismiss the religious/philosophical other than to listen to, analyze and engage in a dialogue. They fail to attract intellectual-spiritual elite and common folk because they don't adequately cater to a) interiorization of faith as gnosis b) metaphysical/experiential/existential/symbolic understanding of belief statements and c) deeper ethical and aesthetic dimensions of traditions they advocate. The object and subject of religion for the most influential number of many a great theologian cum mystic cum philosopher has always been thesis of theomorphic man rather than belief in personal God.

### **Religion**

There is so much confusion and debate on the definition of term religion and the proposed function of

*Muhammad Maroof Shah is a Scholar on Sufism based in Srinagar, Kashmir.  
This and the succeeding article had appeared in daily Greater Kashmir in  
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term God or meaning of God that it is safe to say that we hardly find justice being done in the books written on religion/world religions in Urdu language. Let us read one of the important definitions proposed by Whitehead and elucidated by W T Stace and read the latter on key concept of *nirvana*/heaven.

Whitehead, underscoring the need of personal discovery/gnosis (emphasized by mystics) and solitude in capturing the heart or ultimate objective of religion has famously said that religion is what one does with one's solitude. In his classic *Science and the Modern World* one finds the following "definition" of religion or its ultimate object:

"Religion is the vision of something which stands beyond, behind, and within, the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realized; something which is a remote possibility, and yet the greatest of present facts; something which gives meaning to all that passes, and yet eludes apprehension; something whose possession is the final good, and yet is beyond all reach; something which is the ultimate ideal, and the hopeless quest."

Stace, in his first chapter of brilliant short treatise *Time and Eternity: An Essay on the Philosophy of Religion* builds magnificently on this statement of Whitehead:

"The religious impulse in men is the hunger for the impossible, the unattainable, the inconceivable – or at least for that which is these things in the world of time. And anything which is less than this is not religion – though it may be some very admirable thing such as morality.... Religion seeks the infinite. And the infinite by definition is impossible, unattainable. It is by definition that which can never be reached. Religion seeks the light. But it isn't a light which can be found at any place or time. It isn't somewhere. It is the light which is nowhere. It is "the light which never was on sea or land." Never was. Never will be even in the infinite stretches of future time. This light is non-existent .... Yet it is the great light which lightens the world. Religion is the desire to break away from being and existence altogether to get beyond existence into that nothingness where the great light is . It is the desire to be utterly free from the fetters of being. For every being is a fetter. Existence is a fetter. To be is to be tied to what you are. Religion is the hunger for the non being which yet is ..... So long as there

is light in your life, the light has not yet dawned, You must see that all things, all places, all times, all experiences are equally dark. You must see that all stars are black, only out of the total darkness will the light dawn. Religion is that hunger which no existence past, present or future, no actual existence and no possible existence, in this world or in any other world on the earth or above the cloud and stars material or mental or spiritual, can ever satisfy. For whatever is or could be will have the curse of thisness or thatness."

### **Statements on God**

How far from the religion as commodity sold in market place, with little cognizance of mystery, foregrounding of self righteous judgmental cocksure attitude towards other religions/persons and little immunity against rampant doubt and questioning! W T Stace states that none of the scriptural statements about God can be taken literally and we can't entertain the propositions that God exists or doesn't exist and this doesn't imply he supports atheism or agnosticism or exoteric understanding of theism. To quote him:

You can't attach any predicate to Him, even the predicate 'existence' because every predicate stands for a

concept so that to affirm a predicate of Him is to pretend that He is apprehensible by the conceptual intellect. He is apprehensible in intuition only. Only by that intuition wherein the distinction between subject and object is transcended. Stace explicates further: "But this at once implies that all propositions about God, including "God is" and "God isn't" are false. For all propositions operate through concepts. And all propositions are the work of logical intellect. The same conclusion is reached as a result of the statement that the intuition of God is transcendent of the subject-object division. For "existence" involves that division. It is that which is an object, or possible object, of thought. Finally, the same conclusions are implied by the infinity of God. For the infinite is "that than which there is no other." But to exist means to be one of the many things which stand in relation to one another and which thus systematically related, constitutes the universe.

### **Buddhist Perspective**

Compare this with presentations of God as the Creator thesis and design arguments in sermons and popular books. Stace notes that Buddhism tried to avoid intellectual constructions, concepts and theories and thus the metaphysical theory of

God as a theory woven upon the numinous experience doesn't figure in the usual sense of the term in it. The Buddha's theory was to have no theory and just talk God and not talk about God. He breathed God and God alone, unadulterated by the defilements of mind. Just as *Nirvana* is the supreme experience of a Buddhist mystic, so God simply is the supreme experience of the Christian or Muslim mystic. Stace writes "although God and *Nirvana* are thus conceptually different, they perform the same function for the religious soul as ultimate goal of religious aspiration as satisfaction of the craving for 'that which no eye hath seen, and which hath not entered into the mind of man' and they have same root in mystical experience.... They are two different theories about the same thing. They are divergent intellectual interpretations of the same basic non-intellectual experience ... Properly speaking, *Nirvana* isn't a concept or theory of the numinous experience. It is simply the name of the numinous experience itself. It is the name for that supreme experience wherein all distinctions of subject and object is transcended, wherein the ultimate silence, the ultimate peace, the ultimate blessedness is reached."

In Islamic idiom we can state that Buddhism, like Islam, originally tried to maintain uncompromising

transcendence of the Divine and prescribed eightfold path that echoes the key formulations of Shariah and its central objective of disciplining of the will/nafs and surrender/transcendence of ego principle. How Buddhism affirms key concepts of Tawhid/Absolute centric Islamic Unitarian tradition may be appreciated by reading Treasures of Buddhism by Shaykh Isa Nuruddin or Reza Shah Kazmi's Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism: Spiritual and Ethical Affinities.

Life of Spirit is born (baqa) after life ceases identification with a closed separate autonomous individual in fana. Like Islam, Buddhism has sustained and created one of the most enduring and beautiful cultural and civilizational projects of mankind and can't be charged with either escapism or asceticism or extremism. As a Middle Path it has enshrined the common ethical ideal from Chinese to Greek to Islamic cultures. Buddhism has been wedded to the idea of unity of *samsara* and *nirvana* or this world and other world or body and spirit. It has shunned attachment to the world and not the world. For it beauty saves. And one is encouraged to question, to seek evidence, to examine all ideas dispassionately. Indeed Buddhism impresses (as do Sufism, Taoism etc.) the world of

scholarship (and one is inclined to consider the suggestion for reading of Quranic figure *Zulkifl* as Buddha and with some reservations of Sayibeen as Buddhists/ or inclusive of Buddhists with its rejection of: a) reliance on mere authority b) literalism c) airy abstractions that one has to deglutinate d) fear of rational enquiry e) temptation of rejection of the world and its beauty f) all ideological framing. Who can resist idealizing its invitation for compassion, its ideal of arhat and following one's svadharma or dharma (way of life) to realize nothingness of self and consequent

unceasing reward of eternal life (nirvana/baqa)? Ideologies parasitic on the notion of ego or all illusory self building project can't go too far on the road to Heaven/ Nirvana. Buddhism and Islam call for surrender of self/will to the non-self/Other/Real which is deconstructive non-ideological agenda. The very idea of Revelation is to let go all interpreted worlds, texts (all ideologies are interpretations, texts), speech so that, as Rumi notes, the One who has given us tongue speaks – Silence speaks or the Real discloses Itself/ shines forth. ■